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**LESSONS IN LOOKING:
THE DIGITAL AUDIOVISUAL ESSAY**

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Abstract

This thesis examines the contemporary practice of the digital audiovisual essay, which is defined as a material form of thinking at the crossroads of academic textual analysis, personal cinephilia, and popular online fandom practices, to suggest that it allows rich epistemological discoveries not only about individual films and viewing experiences, but also about how cinema is perceived in the context of digitally mediated audiovisual culture.

Chapter one advances five key defining tensions of the digital audiovisual essay: its object is the investigation of specific films and cinephiliac experiences; it uses a performative research methodology based on the affordances of digital viewing and editing technologies; it exists primarily in Web 2.0 and takes advantage of its collaborative and dialogical modes of production; it is a “rich text object” that continuously tests the different contributions of both verbal and audiovisual forms of communication to the production of knowledge about the cinema; and finally, the digital audiovisual essay has an important pedagogical potential, not only for those who watch it, but especially for those who practice it.

Chapter two presents the theoretical framework of the dissertation, challenges the ‘newness’ of the digital audiovisual essay, and suggests that any investigation of this cultural practice must address its ideological implications and its role in the context of contemporary audiovisual culture. Accordingly, it relates the editing and compositional techniques of the digital audiovisual essay with modernist montage and suggests that the audiovisual essay has not only inherited, but has also updated and enhanced the dialectical interdependency between critical and consumerism drives that shaped modernism’s ambiguous relation to mass culture.

The final chapter examines four case studies (David Bordwell, Catherine Grant, ::kogonada, and Kevin B. Lee) that showcase the contradictory tensions of this cultural practice and broaden our understanding of the politics of the digital audiovisual essay.

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Introduction: lessons in looking

Lessons in looking is the short title of a 2014 digital audiovisual essay by Kevin B. Lee. The essay documents Lee's experience as a writing fellow at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Over the course of its 6 minutes, Lee reviews a student's written assignment about the editing strategies of Maya Deren's *At Land* (1944). As in the best contemporary digital audiovisual essays, the form of Lee's video is as challenging as its subject. This is all the more true because *Lessons in Looking* is not your typical audiovisual essay. There is no editing or reframing: the whole essay is made of a single, fixed shot of Lee's laptop computer screen. The editing and the reframing can be said to take place inside the shot, where multiple windows co-exist and overlap: we can see the desktop itself, a window with the student's paper, and another window where Deren's movie is being played.

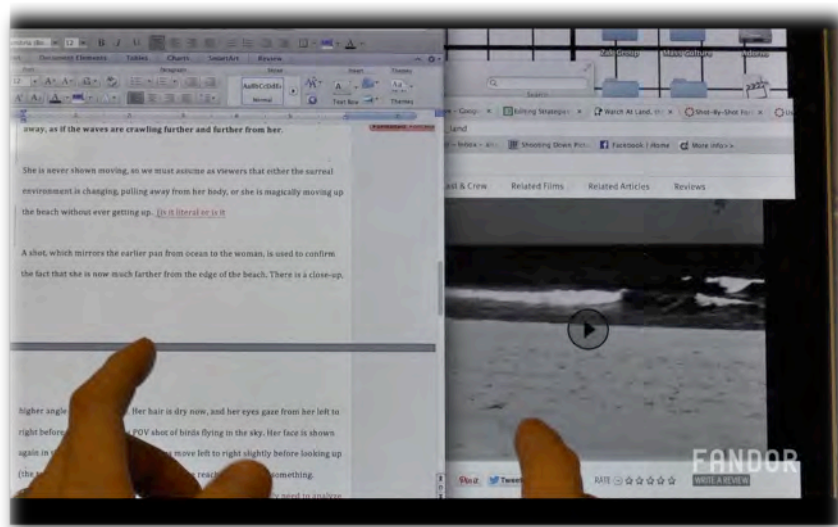


Figure 1: *Lessons in Looking: Editing Strategies of Maya Deren* (Kevin B. Lee, 2014)

None of these windows is static. Their position and dimensions change, or indeed are changed, and their contents continually acted upon. Lee types comments and moves text around in the word processor window; and he plays, stops, fast forwards, and resumes the playing of *At Land* in another window. All

these operations draw the spectator's attention to the desktop surface and, if one watches Lee's video on a computer—as one most likely will—it would be easy to imagine that one is watching an action that is taking place on one's *own* computer desktop. Lee, however, introduces some sonic and spatial cues that remind spectators that they are watching the recorded real-time manipulation of someone else's computer screen. The framing reveals just enough of the edges of Lee's computer screen to signal the presence of a room extending around and beyond the laptop; and we can see, on occasion, Lee's head and hands entering the shot and thus cueing the physical distance between the computer screen and the camera. Finally, the voices of both Lee and the student discussing Deren's film (and the student's analysis) further underline the presence of two bodies that inhabit the physical space of the classroom. They are not only the first spectators of the images on the computer desktop, but also the ones responsible for the manipulation of those images. These options contribute to the ambiguous nature of the filmed desktop: on the one hand, it seems an immaterial device, a pure surface where images seemingly combine themselves without any human intervention; but, on the other hand, it is also a three dimensional object that exists in physical space, and whose combinations of displayed images are the result of explicit human manipulation. In other words, Lee's essay captures the contingent and performative nature of a filmic analysis discussed between a student and her tutor, as it took place one day in 2014 in a room at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

Lee's audiovisual essay is a record of what Raymond Bellour (2010) called the "happy" stage of filmic analysis, done "in vivo" in the classroom, through a collaboration between teacher and student, unimpaired by writing's shortcomings in its relation to the moving image. Although the written word is present in Lee's essay—in the form of the student's paper—it is shown as *part* of a wider method of analysis (i.e., of the audiovisual essay itself) and as a *process*, before it closes down and fixates in one authoritative written form the whirl of analytical possibilities conjured during (and via) the "happy," performative, and oral stage of filmic analysis. The contemporary audiovisual essay thus seems to speak to the advantages of using the moving image to analyse other moving images, in much the same way as the essay and the

compilation film traditions before it. Like the latter, the digital audiovisual essay seems capable of circumventing written film analysis' inability to quote the filmic text, forever destined to chase after it (Bellour 2000, 22–4).

The use of the moving image is not, however, simply a way of overcoming the failings of written filmic analyses nor does it replace a verbal-based method with another, audiovisual one. Lee's *Lessons in Looking* exemplifies the way that these works explore the open, undecided, and processual nature of filmic analysis. Moreover, *Lessons in Looking* showcases another central feature of contemporary audiovisual essays: they are as much a research about specific film objects as they are about the conditions of digital spectatorship that currently mediate access to those same film objects. In both these ways, then, Lee's title could not be more appropriate as a way of encapsulating *digital* audiovisual essays' relation to filmic analysis: they are not lessons in *how to look* (they do not offer a new, authoritative analytical research method); they focus, rather, on what can be learnt *from* watching digitally-mediated moving images today.

The affordances¹ of digital technologies are therefore central to the distinctive identity of the contemporary audiovisual essay when set against the film and video essayistic traditions. Digital viewing and editing technologies are both the *instrument* and the *object* of the contemporary audiovisual essay, as it has been practiced by a number of authors, in different contexts, since the mid-2000s. Even before the development of such digital technologies, Raymond Bellour had already posited that cinema “is the only art of time which, when we go against the principle on which it is based, still turns out to give us something to see, and moreover something alone that allows us to feel its textuality fully” (2000, 26). Bellour was referring specifically to the revelatory power of the still, but his comment can be productively extended to other forms of manipulation of a film. Laura Mulvey (2006) has developed this notion, arguing that digital viewing technologies allow forms of manipulation of the moving image that have an important analytical potential. To be able to stop, repeat and return to a scene

¹ I use the concept in the sense defined by Catherine Grant, in the context of her reflections on the audiovisual essay; i.e., the analytical, critical and creative possibilities offered by the use of non-linear viewing and editing technologies (See Grant 2012; Grant 2014a).

of a film is to *delay* its narrative flow and to open up the possibility to see meanings and relations invisible to the spectator of the unstoppable projection of a film. As Mulvey notes, these viewing operations are very much akin to the processes of textual analysis:

“In film theory and criticism, delay is the essential process behind textual analysis. The flow of a scene is halted and extracted from the wider flow of narrative development; the scene is broken down into shots and selected frames and further subjected to delay, to repetition and return. In the course of this process, hitherto unexpected meanings can be found hidden in the sequence, as it were, deferred to a point of time in the future when the critic's desire may unearth them.” (Mulvey 2006, 144)

With digital technologies, “this kind of fragmentation of film has become easier to put into practice,” (144) which is not to argue that it did not exist previously. In fact, Mulvey's earliest audiovisual essaying was done using a VHS-player/recorder². However, the combination of digital viewing and editing technologies with the affordances of online video publication and sharing has greatly expanded the number of digital audiovisual essayists. This expansion has moved well beyond the academic context to include the fields of film criticism and cinephilia as well. As Mulvey already anticipated in 2006, before the practice of the audiovisual essay effectively took off, “[n]ew ways of consuming old movies on electronic and digital technologies should bring about a ‘reinvention’ of textual analysis and a new wave of cinephilia.” (2006, 160) In hindsight, one can unpack the two implications of Mulvey's intuition: on the one hand, digital technologies did facilitate the multiplication of essayists coming from those different areas; on the other hand, those same technologies allowed for the cross-fertilization of those traditions, their methods and objects, in the practice of the contemporary digital audiovisual essay. Indeed, the digital audiovisual essay has not only renewed the methods of filmic analysis, but allowed the latter to return “to its origins as a work of cinephilia, of love of the cinema.” (Mulvey 2006, 144) The possibility of endlessly returning to one's most favourite or most

² See Mulvey (2006, 172–3). The same essay was digitally remade from a DVD source and published in the first issue of *[In]Transition: Journal of Videographic Film & Moving Image Studies*; see Grant (2014b). Mulvey has recently written about this work; see Mulvey (2014).

enigmatic film sequences contributes not only to indulging the analytic impulse that fragments the film object in order to better understand it, but also to humour the compulsive obsession that extricates a cinematic element from the film's body in order to enable its continued, private enjoyment by the spectator. If this tension between a *pensive* and a *possessive* spectator, as Mulvey (2006) fittingly termed them, is at the centre of contemporary digitally mediated audiovisual culture, the purpose of the audiovisual essay can best be characterised as the self-conscious and highly reflexive research into one's own spectatorial experiences in the age of digital spectatorship. Audiovisual essayists, exploring their own spectatorial experiences, embody the *pensive* and the *possessive* spectators at one and the same time, giving "a personal edge to the mix of intellectual curiosity and fetishistic fascination" (Mulvey 2006, 144) and thus succeeding in illuminating not only an academic object, but also their own cinephile passions³.

By accommodating both cinephilia *and* filmic analysis, the audiovisual essay can be seen as negotiating between two seemingly contradictory tendencies: criticism and consumerism. On the one hand, the audiovisual essay must be seen as a *pensive* and *critical* form of engagement with the film object, one that "unlocks the pleasure of decipherment, not only for an elite but also for anyone who has access to the new technologies of consumption." (Mulvey 2006, 191) On the other hand, the audiovisual essay's *possessive* manipulation of the film object —and of so many other moving images— allows the spectator to literally take hold of the film and own it. The audiovisual essay can be seen as a transfer to the spectator of the film industry's previously exclusive ability to provide the film fan with "secondary images" with which to uphold the impossible "illusion of possession" of the film object (Mulvey 2006, 161). The fact that this illusion is accompanied by epistemological activities that, as we shall see, are often of a merely pseudo-critical nature, suggests that, rather than hindering the cycle of audiovisual consumerism, the audiovisual essay will also stimulate it further.

³ This tension is especially obvious in Mulvey's own audiovisual essayistic work; see the previous note, and Baptista (2014).

In this light, Lee's discussion of the editing strategies of Maya Deren is anything but fortuitous. By inscribing the editing and compositional techniques of the digital audiovisual essay in the tradition of modernist montage, Lee suggests that the affordances of digital technologies play a key role in updating the history of modernism's ambiguous relation with mass culture.

1. The exemplary text of contemporary audiovisual culture

Digital audiovisual essays, essentially the product of Web 2.0 and digital viewing and editing technologies, have increased dramatically in number since the mid-2000s and are by now, recognised as a 'popular cultural form'. As a tool that focuses on the analysis of cinema, with an openness to methodological experimentation and miscegenation of analytical and creative purposes, the digital audiovisual essay has close links to previously existing modes of audiovisual thinking. Indeed, as this cultural form taps into a wide variety of cultural practices that range from the essay film and the compilation film, to film criticism and academic film analysis, but also to the classroom or conference lecture and to popular online cultural forms such as the supercut, it appeals to a wide diversity of practitioners from different personal and professional backgrounds. However, digital mediation has definitely changed the ways in which the audiovisual essay can appropriate, transform and share filmic texts. Audiovisual essays mobilize the epistemological potential of digital viewing and editing technologies to investigate cinema through the direct appropriation, fragmentation, and recombination of images, sounds and words. These manipulations necessarily not only teach something about the textual qualities of the audiovisual text and its varied subject formation processes, but also about the historicity and material trajectories of the moving image. The audiovisual essay can therefore be used to learn not only something about the films that it analyses, but also about the more general affordances of digital viewing and editing technologies, and how they affect the reception of digitally mediated audiovisual texts. This cultural practice allows the essayist to come to terms with an important personal spectatorial experience, and to communicate that

experience to the spectators of his audiovisual essay. However, because that experience was originally shaped by, and is again shared via digital viewing and editing technologies, the audiovisual essay also teaches something about the conditions of digital spectatorship in which both the essayist and the spectators of his essays are mutually immersed. As a consequence, the spectator of the audiovisual essay can presumably be made as conscious as the audiovisual essayist was, of the affordances of the digital technologies —and specifically of the epistemological potential— that also inform the everyday engagements with digitally mediated audiovisual culture of the ordinary, casual spectator.

Central to this dissertation is the argument that digitally mediated audiovisual texts create active, perceptually charged viewing situations that require the spectator to engage with specific formal operations —namely, those involved in certain *editing* and *compositional techniques*— that have an intrinsic epistemological potential, thereby transforming the encounters with contemporary audiovisual texts into lessons in the conditions of possibility of those same texts, and of the role of the spectator in that process. To suggest the existence of a widely available epistemological potential in every engagement with audiovisual texts hardly implies the dissemination of critical forms of spectatorship. On the contrary, one must ask whether digitally mediated audiovisual culture has not integrated this critical stance in the act of reception only to enhance more sophisticated forms of consumption. Reflecting upon Laura Mulvey's early audiovisual essays, Catherine Grant suggested that “non-linear editing obviously offers the additional and constitutive affordances of extraction and reformation of the component parts of the film object.” (Grant 2014a, 53) However, as Mulvey noted, if these new digital affordances offer more space and time “for associative thought, [for] reflection on resonance and connotation, [for] the identification of visual clues, the interpretation of cinematic form and style,” they also strongly inspire “personal reverie” (Mulvey 2006, 146–147, quoted in Grant 2014a, 51). Therefore, the affordances of digital delivery technologies might define the digital essay as an important mode of audiovisual and material *thinking*, but not necessarily of *critical* and *emancipatory* thinking. This dilemma is not entirely new. It is, in fact, only the most recent re-enactment of the tensions between critical thought and

consumerism already at stake in 20th century debates about *modernism*. These tensions were embodied in cultural practices such as *montage*, whose formal operations —fragmentation, recombination, repetition— are still at the centre of the rhetorical strategies employed by contemporary digital audiovisual essays and have been greatly emphasised by the affordances of digital viewing and editing technologies.

From a methodological perspective, the dissertation traces the ambiguous relation with mass culture, that still characterizes digitally mediated audiovisual culture, back to modernism; and it takes the digital audiovisual essay as the *exemplary text* of those tensions as they are foregrounded and exacerbated by the specific affordances of digital delivery technologies. This perspective implies a specific interpretation of modernism that sees it as characterised by such contradictory tensions and ambiguities. The digital audiovisual essay will help make this interpretation of modernism clearer, just as the history of modernism will shed light on the complexities and ambiguities of the digital audiovisual essay itself. In this way, this dissertation will look at the digital audiovisual essay not so much as a complete novelty (and much less as an exclusively benign cultural form), but rather as the continuation and the (more or less) self-conscious recognition of the tensions constitutive of the long history of mass-produced and mass-circulated audiovisual culture.

2. Terminologies, corpus and periodization

Video essay, videographic experimentation, remix, supercut, video lecture, video example. Various terms have been used to describe the different practices and contexts of what I will call the *digital audiovisual essay*. I use the term deliberately as an umbrella concept that groups practices with contrasting formal features, authors from quite distinct backgrounds, and various production and reception contexts. General and neutral, the expression *digital audiovisual essay* refuses any normative understanding of the form, which would negate its fertile diversity. In this way, the expression also refuses any value judgements or hierarchization of the contexts, backgrounds, or formal

characteristics that make up its heterogeneity. The expression ‘digital audiovisual essay’ can therefore be used to understand the movements of cross-fertilization and its simultaneous co-existence across different social, cultural and professional contexts, with different degrees of recognition, popularity and appraisal.

All the words contained in this expression —digital audiovisual essay—are problematic; and the term “essay” is probably the most problematic of all. It remains, nonetheless, still useful in two very important ways. First, the digital audiovisual *essay* finds an important part of its conceptual lineage in the literary and filmic essayistic traditions⁴. Like the latter, it is a cultural form able to examine the world in a self-reflexive fashion, which foregrounds the fact that the essay, *qua* material text, emerges out of a process akin to thought (and therefore including the hesitations and contradictions of thought), and that it is the product of its author’s individual subjectivity. Secondly, the term *essay* captures the relation to both creativity and to a free, open form of expression that is also constitutive of the digital audiovisual essay. At the same time, this openness created in the audiovisual essay the need for a self-conscious use, marked by its public and militant vindication as a *valid* analytical tool. Even if this filiation might bring about some confusion as to the prevalence of the written word or the voice-over in the definition of the audiovisual essay, its inscription in this tradition of methodological transgression, subjectivity, self-reflexivity and self-consciousness still proves pertinent and more than worthwhile.

The choice of the terms “digital” and “audiovisual,” instead of the more common term “video,” also calls for an explanation. The use of “audiovisual” is intended to emphasise the importance of both the visual and *aural* elements of the contemporary essay (Álvarez López and Martin 2014a). As we shall see, not only do those elements extend well beyond the simple voice-over commentary, but they are also the object of independent analysis and contribute in very substantial ways to the overall rhetorical strategies employed by many essayists. On the other hand, the use of the term “digital” is intended as a clarification of the exact technological context in which these essays are produced, distributed

⁴ A lineage that has recently been the object of several studies. See, for example, Rascaroli (2009); Corrigan (2011); and Kramer and Tode (2011).

and watched, which ceased to be limited to video or electronic devices almost twenty years ago. Not only does the *digital* audiovisual essay refer to a cultural practice that is much closer, temporally, to us —whose eruption can be situated in the mid-2000s— but also, and more importantly, to the constitutive importance of digital viewing and editing technologies: these are not only the *conditions of possibility* of the digital audiovisual essay, but also its *objects* of investigation. Finally, the term also refers to the *online* existence of the contemporary audiovisual essay. Contrary to its filmic and video predecessors, the digital audiovisual essay is the offspring of digital communication networks, online databases of moving images, and of the Web 2.0 of social media. As such, it is both the *product* and the public, collaborative *research tool* of its own conditions of existence.

A final word must be said to justify the *corpus* of digital audiovisual essays discussed in this dissertation —and, in particular, the four cases studies in chapter 3—, as well as the decision not to include any examples made after 2014. Composed entirely of English-speaking authors, and one single female-essayist, this selection is believed to be representative of the vast number of active essayists from the US and the United Kingdom, or working in English. The overwhelming majority of male-essayists merely echoes a similar situation both in the academic world and in the realm of online film criticism. Within the universe of English-speaking essayists, however, my choice was guided by two principles: first, the desire to include personal favourites that would still be relevant for a comparative discussion of the internal diversity of the form; and second, the necessity to include essayists that have accompanied their audiovisual essays with written, self-reflexive work advocating the relevance of this audiovisual form —a decisive defining characteristic of the digital audiovisual essay, at least in this foundational period. Even if many other essayists are mentioned throughout the dissertation, I am very sorry not to have been able to include not only Portuguese-speaking essayists, but also more essayists from the European continent, especially from France. That, however, would have considerably expanded this text and diluted the cohesion of its central argument.

Finally, why stop at 2014? This was not so much a deliberate decision but rather a consequence of the writing process and its timings, as well as of the very

rapid development of the process of institutionalization of the digital audiovisual essay. While, as mentioned above, I trace the history of this form, and of the delivery technologies that make it possible, back to its origins in the mid-2000s, I stop at 2014 not only because the process of institutionalization had by then reached important symbolic milestones, but also because, as Kevin B. Lee (probably one of the most popular and influential audiovisual essayists) put it, “[t]he year 2014 was explosive in terms of both the number and variety of video essays produced.” (2015)

3. Dissertation structure

If there is one central idea underpinning this dissertation, it is its resistance to considering the digital audiovisual essay as something entirely new. This is not to say that I would rather have constructed my argument out of the narrowing perspective of the cultural forms and practices that preceded it. To avoid the methodological perils of arguing that the digital audiovisual essay exists outside history or, on the contrary, of making it the victim of a teleological hijack, I propose to shift the scale of my analysis. From the consideration of the cultural forms that would, for example, posit the development of the digital audiovisual essay in relation to the essay film tradition (or film criticism, or online fandom practices, or scholarly film analysis), I suggest a move towards the consideration of the *formal operations* similarly present in different social, technological, and historical contexts. This is not to suggest, however, that such formal operations provide ready-made, stable aesthetic principles to which a taxonomy of the digital audiovisual essay could be applied. On the contrary, these formal operations are inherently contradictory in the sense that they contribute to define the audiovisual essay as *critical* of, but also as *co-opted* by, contemporary audiovisual culture.

To connect the formal operations at the core of the digital audiovisual essay with the ambiguous, problematic, formal operations of modernist cultural practices, such as montage is, therefore, to shift the focus to the *consequences* of the practice of digital essaying. It is, in other words, to look for the *ideological*

functions of such formal operations and the ways in which they affect our understanding of contemporary audiovisual culture when compared with previous technological contexts. It is, in short, to address the *politics* of the digital audiovisual essay, that is, to assess its role in the preserve of those capitalist processes that shape contemporary audiovisual culture. This means that, in spite of its striking semiotic revelations about film history, specific films and filmmakers, of its pedagogical potential, and of its inherently epistemological potential —now disseminated beyond the academy into everyday viewing situations—, the digital audiovisual essay must also be analysed against itself, to disclose how it contributes to shaping and preserving its own conditions of existence. The digital audiovisual essay, in other words, produces its own standing as an exemplary text of contemporary audiovisual culture. Any analysis of its role must necessarily take this process into account.

As the table of contents of this dissertation should make clear, a substantial amount of space is allocated to the close analysis of individual audiovisual essays. This was done for several reasons. To begin with, there was little pre-existing literature on most of the essays analysed here. A detailed, close analysis of most of them was required so as to pursue my arguments. Secondly, close, textual analysis could give my argument the level of detail needed to account for the specific formal operations under discussion, and their inherent, but also ambiguous, epistemological potentials. Only via a thorough dissection of the formal strategies used in these essays was it possible to challenge their supposedly critical stance and to show, instead, their complicity with the production, circulation, and reception cycles of contemporary audiovisual culture. Finally, I found it as good as irresistible, not to say addictive, to engage with those texts in this way. Audiovisual essays seem to encourage this form of *mise-en-abyme* reading: they are themselves, after all, the record of previous viewing situations and spectator experiences. In doing so, I might have come dangerously close to falling prey to their stimulation of pseudo-critical activity —although I have done my best to avoid it, and indeed to turn it against the essays themselves. The close analysis of these essays has, of course, subjected the texts to a great violence. First, I used verbal language to make sense of an audiovisual piece that was fundamentally (and often, militantly)

designed as an alternative to written analyses. Moreover, textual analysis also works to deplete the meaning of texts that have often tried to suggest and imply, rather than analyse and interpret. Once again, I was at pains to avoid such clashes with the analysed essays, while also accommodating the systematic approach expected of an academic dissertation.

In chapter 1, I put forward a provisional definition of the digital audiovisual essay. First, I situate the audiovisual essay as a practice at the crossroads of academic textual analysis and cinephilia, and offer a short survey of the recent history of the form, from the mid-2000s to 2014. I end by suggesting five key features of the digital audiovisual essay that will be developed and tested in the detailed analyses of chapter 3. These features are described as *defining tensions*, rather than stable, normative characteristics of the digital audiovisual essay.

Chapter 2 is where I present and justify the theoretical framework of the dissertation, namely the focus on modernism and its key formal operations, such as they have been codified by montage. Inspired by the concept of *remediation*, which is central to my discussion of both montage and modernism, this chapter accordingly describes the *double logic* of the digital audiovisual essay: a cultural form (and practice) that draws attention to the specific films it analyses, as much as to the textual and subject formation processes of cinema in general; that stimulates the mimetic representation of moving images, as much as the technological mediation that makes not only their presentation, but also their manipulation by the audiovisual essayist possible in the first place; and that encourages the spectator to engage in these epistemological discoveries, as much as it banks on these pseudo-critical activities to develop and enhance the modes of consumption of digitally mediated audiovisual texts. This theoretical framework should make clear the evaluative parameters that I use to study the case studies of the following chapter, which are directly connected to my use of the term *critical*. When I question the *critical* potential of the audiovisual essay, I am not simply using the concept as a synonym of its obvious analytical abilities to investigate specific films. I am also referring to the *emancipatory* potential afforded by those analytical activities —that is, whether they work to enhance the rapid, passive consumerism of audiovisual texts, or rather if they allow the

spectator to challenge this process itself. However, my point is not so much that it is necessary to distinguish between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ forms of digital audiovisual essaying, nor between critical and consumerist (a-critical) modes of reception. My argument is rather that one activity is *folded* into the other, and that the critical manipulation of the audiovisual text is now an intrinsic part of the process of its everyday, casual reception and warrants, in itself, no emancipatory promises whatsoever. As the exemplary text of contemporary audiovisual culture, and the inheritor of the dialectical tensions that characterised modernism, the digital essay will illuminate this process, of which it is both the product and the agent. In its worst examples, the audiovisual essay will engage in pseudo-critical activities that enhance the consumerist drives of digitally mediated audiovisual culture; but in its best examples, it will become an emancipatory cultural practice that exposes the intimate interdependence between analytical activities and consumerism on which contemporary audiovisual culture is based as a first step to challenge it.

Finally, in chapter 3, I offer a detailed analysis of the work of four digital essayists: David Bordwell, Catherine Grant, ::kogonada, and Kevin B. Lee. My choices are neither intended to establish a canon, nor present a normative view of this cultural practice. They seek, instead, to consolidate my central argument about the ambiguities of the audiovisual essay in its relation to mass culture and critical thought. This drive translates into the oppositional organization of the four case studies. In the first pair of case studies, centred on the academic context, the practice of the digital essay will be seen to range from the promotion of the scholar’s *previously existing written* work (Bordwell) to the exploration of (tendentially) *digital* audiovisual research methods to produce *new* work (Grant). In the case of the other two essayists, the practice of the form will range from a familiarity with popular cultural forms and a domesticated, *vernacular* practice of montage that utterly defuses its critical potential (::kogonada) to the very negation of the conditions of existence of contemporary audiovisual culture (Lee). Lee’s work will play a key role as a summary of the entire dissertation in the sense that his method of the “desktop cinema” not only embodies the double logic of remediation and, therefore, the ambiguous relation to mass culture that the digital audiovisual culture inherits from modernism, but also challenges the

ideological functions of the digital audiovisual essay and its complicity with capitalism.

A final note about the audiovisual essays themselves. Although their URLs are included in the final Filmography, all the essays quoted and analysed here are also compiled in the DVD attached to this text.

1. The digital audiovisual essay

In recent years, the availability of digital viewing and editing technologies has encouraged the growing practice of the *digital* audiovisual essay. The use of images to comment on other images is not specific to digital technologies, but in the last ten years its practitioners and venues of presentation have multiplied. The form itself has taken its first steps toward academic recognition, and has begun to be militantly defended as a relevant, valid alternative to the scholarly, written production of knowledge about cinema. Scholars are latecomers to a cultural practice that for a large portion of the 20th century has mostly drawn the interest of avant-garde artists and filmmakers committed to the essay film tradition, but which currently includes film critics, the savvy cinephile, and film studies students. As we shall see, the practice of the digital audiovisual essay has in fact complicated these distinctions, bridging previously distinct types of knowledge about cinema, or at the very least reviving “in academic circles (...) the kind of ‘expressive’ criticism devoted to close reading and [aesthetic] evaluation” that characterized “early academic scholarship in the late 1960s and early 1970s” (Keathley 2011, 178).

Digital audiovisual essays have an important point of origin in the DVD extra, where they can still be found (Criterion being the most prolific and influential commissioners). But their presentation venues are to be found mostly online, ranging from password protected film studies textbook companion websites (such as McGraw-Hill’s *Connect* for David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson’s *Film Art: An Introduction*, since 2012) to individual blogs such as Kevin B. Lee’s *Shooting Down Pictures* (since 2007), and Catherine Grant’s *Filmanalytical* and *Film Studies for Free* (2008); and from blogs associated with movie news aggregator websites like IndieWire’s *PressPlay* or Fandor’s *Keyframe* (2012) to individual and community channels (like *Audiovisualcy*, 2011) in video sharing platforms such as Vimeo and YouTube. It is undoubtedly its *online*

presence that makes for the digital audiovisual essay's popularity and novelty in comparison with previous forms of audiovisual analysis. These websites are visited daily by a great number of Internet users. Individual authors like Catherine Grant and Kevin B. Lee have each produced several dozen essays (by late 2014, Grant had made 90 videos and Lee over 200) and some videos, like Erlend Lavik's *Style in The Wire* (2012) or Matthias Storks' *Chaos Cinema* series (3 parts, 2011), have reached over 100.000 plays (Stork 2012a; Lavik 2012a).

Besides its growing online popularity, the audiovisual essay is also taking its first steps toward *institutional recognition* as an academic form. Some universities now offer permanent courses or workshops on the subject. Janet Bergstorm holds a workshop-seminar at UCLA since 2004, aimed at producing "research essays burned on DVD" (Stork and Bergstorm 2012) and inspired by the DVD extra format; and Christian Keathley offers a course "on producing video essays" at Middlebury College (Keathley 2012). In 2012, Catherine Grant and Christian Keathley also presented a video essay workshop at the Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference, in Boston. More recently, in June 2015, Christian Keathley and Jason Mittel organised a two-week workshop on "videographic criticism" at Middlebury College, where participants produced their own audiovisual works⁵. Since 2015, the offer of audiovisual essay courses, seminars and workshops has expanded considerably.

Some established *film journals and magazines* have also began to include sections for the online publishing of digital audiovisual essays, such as *Mediascape: UCLA's Journal of Cinema and Media Studies*⁶ (where some of the essays made by Bergstorm's students have been published), *Moving Image Source*⁷, the online magazine of the Museum of the Moving Image, and, since its Autumn 2014 issue, *Necus: European Journal of Media Studies*⁸ includes a 'Audiovisual Essays' section edited by Cristina Álvarez López and Adrian Martin. *Audiovisual Thinking: A Journal of Academic Videos*⁹ (founded in 2010) was probably the first academic online journal exclusively dedicated to video essays,

⁵ <http://sites.middlebury.edu/videoworkshop/>

⁶ <http://www.tft.ucla.edu/mediascape/>

⁷ <http://www.movingimagesource.us>

⁸ <http://www.necus-ejms.org>

⁹ <http://www.audiovisualthinking.org>

exploring the possibilities of the format in the context of the digital humanities and therefore extending its visual essays to a wide variety of subjects¹⁰. However, the first peer-reviewed journal exclusively dedicated to the audiovisual essay is more recent. Founded in 2014, *[in]Transition: Journal of Videographic & Moving Image Studies*¹¹ privileges reflexive work that explores the limits of this practice and that focuses on the history of cinema.

The audiovisual essay has also been the object of at least two *research projects*. In 2009, the *Kunst der Vermittlung*¹² (the Art of Mediation) explored the tradition of the film essay, curating the work of filmmakers like Harun Farocki, Gustav Deutsch, Alain Bergala, Jean Douchet, Tag Gallagher, André S. Labarthe, addressing the production of DVD extras, as well as early examples of video essays. The project not only curated some of these videos, but also included an analysis of this practice in two written essays by Kevin B. Lee and Matt Zoller Seitz (Lee 2009; Seitz 2014) and the screening of a selection of their early work, with a focus on Lee's *Shooting Down Pictures* series (started in 2007). More recently, in 2012, the *Film Studies in Motion* project was organised by Kevin B. Lee and Volker Pantenburg at the Bauhaus-University at Weimar as a seven-episode web series that curated online audiovisual essays.

Finally, two special issues of online film journals have recently been dedicated to the audiovisual essay —*Frames* (1.1, 2012) and *[in]Transition* (1.3, 2014), both edited by Catherine Grant— and the first conference entirely devoted to the same subject was held in Frankfurt in November 2013 —*The Audiovisual Essay: Practice and Theory*, organised by Adrian Martin and Cristina Álvarez López, and supported by Vinzenz Hediger, of Goethe University-Frankfurt¹³. The proceedings of this conference, as well as many other valuable resources, are now available on the website “The Audiovisual Essay,” managed

¹⁰ *Audiovisual Thinking* is peer-reviewed since 2011.

¹¹ <http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/intransition/>

¹² <http://www.kunst-der-vermittlung.de>

¹³ It is also worth adding that the institutionalization process of the audiovisual essay is contemporaneous with the publication of several books on the essay film tradition. See, for example, Liandrat-Guigues and Gagnebin (2004); Rascaroli (2009); Corrigan (2011); Bellour (2011); Kramer and Tode (2011).

by Catherine Grant in the context of the REFRAME research platform of the University of Sussex.¹⁴

This very incomplete list —surely quickly outdated¹⁵— points to the rapid development of the digital audiovisual essay in recent years and, more specifically, to its progressive institutionalization. In 2011, Christian Keathley posited that the two key conditions for the academic success of the audiovisual essay would be “the creation of pedagogical environments to support such work —both in teaching and in research— and peer reviewed venues of publication that would offer professional validation.” (2011, 190) If to these are added academic conferences about the audiovisual essay, it is clear that the scholarly validation of this alternative method for producing knowledge about the moving image was well under way by the end of 2014. However, some essayists have voiced the concern that this process might lead to an undesired, precocious normalization of the field. The tension, which currently drives the diversity of the audiovisual essay, between more conventional, verbal-based, *explanatory* modes of expression, and more creative, purely audiovisual, *poetic* modes of expression, may well come to be inflected towards the former, more recognizably aligned with the traditional written essay and the lecture formats¹⁶. Furthermore, the peer reviewing process of this type of work raises problems of its own. What parameters should be observed during the peer review of a digital audiovisual essay? Aware of these obstacles, essayists like Catherine Grant advocate a balance between an institutionalization of the audiovisual essay, that would allow more people to engage with it, and a selection and production process that might be closer to collaborative *curating* than to quality-check *gatekeeping*: “that will hopefully get the dialogue going, allowing space for comment at every stage, inviting people to participate.” (Grant in Álvarez López et al. 2014)

In spite of these auspicious steps, the scholarly audiovisual essayist still faces many obstacles. The dangers of premature institutionalization go hand in

¹⁴ <http://reframe.sussex.ac.uk/audiovisualessay/>

¹⁵ For more on the institutionalization process of the audiovisual essay, see Grant (2012) and (Álvarez López and Martin 2014a).

¹⁶ The difference between the explanatory and the poetic modes of the audiovisual essay was suggested by Christian Keathley (2011) and has become influential in audiovisual essay studies ever since.

hand with academic suspicion towards a non-written, and often not even verbal-based approach to the production of knowledge about cinema. It is therefore not surprising that many scholars have hesitated to engage with the audiovisual essay in an academic context, merely using it as a tool to increase the visibility of their written work. Furthermore, this is still a technically demanding and time-consuming activity that is not as rewarding as a publication in a print or online journal in terms of career advancement (Thompson 2012). Paradoxically, then, while younger scholars might seem better equipped with the technological skills required to practice the audiovisual essay, they are discouraged from doing so because they are “expected to publish frequently and in prestigious journals” if they wish to have a chance of securing a permanent position in the academy (Lavik 2012b). Indeed, it has been mostly tenured, established scholars, benefitting from technical support, who have pioneered academic audiovisual essays or, for that matter, were able to establish courses that extend the production of those essays to their students¹⁷.

As this short review of the recent history of the form has shown, any attempt to perform a survey of the contemporary practice of the audiovisual essay is at best difficult, and must address the complex issue of describing a form that is hostile to description, does not have a stable group of features, and is carefully vigilant of any attempts that would accelerate its institutional acceptance. In the rest of this chapter, I will advance a *provisional* definition of the digital audiovisual essay based on *five key features* that will be developed and tested in the detailed analyses of chapter 3. These features shall be described as *defining tensions*, more than stable, normative characteristics of the digital audiovisual essay.

¹⁷ Such is the case, admittedly, of Christian Keathley and Janet Bergstorm, but also of Catherine Grant, Pam Cook, and of Laura Mulvey, one of the earliest practitioners of the scholarly audiovisual essay.

1.1. Five key defining tensions

In a recent attempt to define the audiovisual essay, Cristina Álvarez López and Adrian Martin suggested that it is the child of at least two mothers: “the tradition of research and experimentation that comes through avant-garde film and video, particularly all that is gathered under the rubric of found footage work”; and the “essay-film (or film-essay), that historical breakaway from supposedly objective documentary which stresses the elements of the personal and the reflective, and which has itself spawned many sub-forms in the digital age.” (Álvarez López and Martin 2014a) However, if the development of the digital audiovisual essay also depends on the unprecedented availability of “raw materials,” —that is, of “the images and sounds of pre-existing film, television, and media items” (Álvarez López and Martin 2014a)—, the list of influential traditions should further include the many user and fan appropriation genres typical of the Web 2.0, as well as the DVD audio commentary and documentary extra (and could even be stretched, as we shall see, to the classroom and conference lecture). This explains the varied backgrounds that characterise contemporary digital audiovisual essayists —film criticism, academic film studies, or everyday (although not necessarily casual) cinephilia—, as well as the wide variety of methods used in their work, from explanatory research and “creative criticism” (Martin 2012b) to poetic exploration (Keathley 2011; Álvarez López and Martin 2014a). In keeping with the movie predilections and varied backgrounds of their authors, digital audiovisual essays are more or less analytical, and more or less eulogising, ranging from the use of sophisticated voice-overs and/or written titles and diagrams, multiple-screen comparisons, and the employment of elaborate editing effects such as superimpositions, fades and dissolves, to the simple accumulation of shots of the same type inspired by fandom practices, of which the supercut, as will surface later, is the most popular and effective example. This methodological variety has proven problematic in terms of the acceptance of the audiovisual essay in the academic context, but it has also been welcomed (in and outside the university) as a way to fend off any premature normalization. It is also, of course, in keeping with the essayistic tradition, both

in its literary and filmic forms. The audiovisual essay similarly privileges the direct, open, free and undecided encounter with its object, its outcome being the record of the experience of that encounter, more than a thorough description and explanation of the object itself. The result of a passionate relation with its object, the audiovisual essay, like its literary counterpart, also “mirrors what is loved and hated” about that object, and is necessarily incomplete, beginning with what it wants to discuss and stopping where it feels itself complete, “not where nothing is left to say” (Adorno 1984, 152).

To identify all the formal characteristics of the audiovisual essay and then to cross-reference them with the formal characteristics of the many other cultural practices that have influenced it is beyond the scope of this dissertation. Moreover, it would stifle the investigation of the audiovisual essay, submitting it to a checklist of pre-identified traits whose existence or not would decree its degree of originality and validity. I will, instead, start from the practice of the audiovisual essay in order to identify some features that illuminate, not only what distinguishes the digital audiovisual essay from other cultural practices that preceded it or that persist alongside it, but also what links it to them. Some of these features will be obvious and have already been pointed out by other writers; others I believe have been insufficiently addressed thus far. These features do not constitute definitive guidelines for a survey of the audiovisual essay (which is not attempted here), but merely as the framework for my rather more specific argument —detailed in the following chapters— that the practice is an exemplary text of digitally mediated audiovisual culture and, in particular, of modernism’s ambiguous relation to mass culture.

To be more emphatic, by advancing this provisional set of characteristics, I do not wish to identify the acceptable or most defining formal elements of the digital audiovisual essay, nor do I want to define the most acceptable contexts for its use. Instead, I share the view that the audiovisual essay is constituted by a wide and cumulative, rather than exclusive, “spectrum” (Grant 2012) of features and methodologies. This perspective de-naturalizes the essay as a pre-determined *form* emphasising, instead, its importance as a *process*. I will therefore privilege the analysis of the *essayistic*, rather than of the *essay*, and consider it, as Bellour suggested, more “as a quality or as a substance, such as

water or air or light, and by the way possibly in constant variable proportion.” (Bellour 2011, 57) In this way, I wish to suggest that the digital audiovisual essay can be characterised as a series of productive tensions —both formal and contextual— between new (non-written, audiovisual) scholarly types of knowledge about cinema and the investigation of personal cinephile experiences; between theoretical thought and a material thinking process about cinema that involves its direct, continuous handling; between the private and public discussion of the essayist’s work in the dialogical and collaborative contexts of the Web 2.0 of “social media”; between the different contributions of verbal- and audiovisual elements of communication that shape the audiovisual essay; and finally, between the pedagogical potential that this practice affords not only to those who make it, but also to those who watch it. Accordingly, the list of characteristics listed below is not only tentative, but also hardly self-contained, each distinctive element readily folding into another.

1.1.1. Between academia and cinephilia: a new type and a different object of knowledge about cinema

Unlike the essay film and the video essay, which were often employed to address any number of issues, the digital audiovisual essay tends to focus on *cinema*. This is not to say that digital audiovisual essays do not engage with other moving images, and in particular, the television series. One of the “blockbusters” of digital audiovisual essays, which I mentioned in passing above, addressed the television series *The Wire*¹⁸. However, cinema still provides the most frequent focal point of digital audiovisual essays, many of which address individual movies or the work of a single filmmaker, highlighting a specific shot or scene, a recurrent technique or motif. In other words, audiovisual essays favour close, stylistic analysis and strive to isolate the details that might best illuminate a filmmaker’s “style” and interpreting the meanings embodied in that style. The fact that this type of analysis has a consolidated tradition in both film studies and film criticism might also account for its importance in the digital audiovisual

¹⁸ *Style in The Wire* (Erlend Lavik, 2012).

essay, as well as for the preference of the audiovisual essayist for the analysis of *auteur cinema*. This is, however, only one methodological option among many others. Auteur and modern cinema are not the exclusive objects of digital audiovisual essays. In fact, many audiovisual essays turn their attention to *mainstream cinema* as well.

The affordances of digital viewing and editing technologies might explain both the favouring of cinema, and the predominance of stylistic analysis. Digital viewing technologies allow film critics, scholars and cinephiles to literally *own* the film (or the television show), and thus to replay it at will, to change the speed and direction of the moving image flow, even to halt it, and to return endlessly to the shots, scenes and sequences that are the object of one's analysis, or fascination. While previous domestic video formats and non-linear viewing technologies already allowed for many of these practices, with the help of editing software, these viewing experiences —along with the discoveries and pleasures they bring forth— can be enhanced in even more complex ways, and what is more, can be *shared publicly*. Digital viewing and editing technologies enable a type of relation to the cinematic image for which the digital audiovisual essay provides an endless *continuation* of sorts. In this process of *continued engagement* with cinema, spectators not only indulge in their favourite cinephile compulsions, but they also improve their understanding of a particular movie — and, for that matter, of the filmic devices that may be constitutive of a filmmaker's *auteurial* style, but which are also constitutive of the meaning formation strategies of cinema in general. In other words, the audiovisual essay necessarily fosters both its author's and its subsequent spectator's knowledge about cinema. It is not surprising, then, that the digital audiovisual essay has been taken up by so many scholars as a pedagogical tool that can put across their arguments about specific films and filmmakers more persuasively than written articles and books could ever hope to do, while also reaching a wider, more immediate and more easily quantifiable audience than their written publications.



Figure 2: *SFR* (Christian Keathley, 2012)

However, the production of new knowledge about cinema does not account for the full scope of digital audiovisual essays. What is at stake in the audiovisual essay is not only the production of a *different* (non-written, audiovisual) type of knowledge about cinema, but also the production of a *shift* in the object of that knowledge, one that will focus “less on films themselves as objects of study than on a particular spectatorial experience and its relationship to the process of writing criticism” (Grant and Keathley 2014). As some authors have noted, the audiovisual essay is often motivated by the desire to engage with the unconscious, even irrational, motives that led a spectator to feel so drawn to a particular cinematic moment. In some cases, the appeal of a film, or a particular sequence of a film to a spectator may be due to their individual biography. While these aesthetic experiences are at the centre of cinephilia, film studies scholarship “has tended to repress them, or at least to back away from them, to keep them at arm’s length for the purposes of distanced, objective analysis and interpretation in a discourse marked by a full and firm hold on external reality.” (Grant and Keathley 2014) Using the concept of “transitional phenomena”, Christian Keathley and Catherine Grant have defended the practice of the audiovisual essay as a method that explores the combination and the cross-contaminations of an external reality (cinema) with the individual self (that is, one’s memories, emotions and psychic investments). Using their own autobiographical examples, Grant and Keathley (2014) have explored how the

audiovisual essay could engender a “particular spectatorial experience” and certain biographic events illuminate and explain each other. They have, in this way, demonstrated how the audiovisual essay can “enable cinephilia to function as a form of creative scholarly expression” (Grant and Keathley 2014) that instead of flouting “affect, feeling, [and] emotion” (Grant 2014e), uses them to “show something about our relationship with our cinematic objects of study,” and “to explore and express, in a particularly compelling way, how we use these objects imaginatively in our inner lives” (Grant and Keathley 2014).

1.1.2. Between theory and practice: a material thinking process

The digital technologies that structure the contemporary audiovisual essay are, much like the technologies that shape the “digital humanities,” not a “supplement or a translation but part and parcel from inception” (Friedberg 2009, 152). They are, in this sense, *constitutive* of the digital audiovisual essay and a pivotal distinguishing feature from previous essayistic audiovisual traditions, either in film or in video.

The fact that digital technologies shape the contemporary audiovisual essay carries rich consequences. Contrary to written scholarly work, digital audiovisual essays are able not only to communicate an argument, but also to have the spectator “*experience* it, powerfully, sensually” (Grant 2013). Editing strategies that compare different shots, either sequentially, using a multiple-screen or even a superimposition, quote the moving image and argue as to the existence of similarities and differences in a much more compelling way than any written text could ever hope to do. However, these strategies of audiovisual comparison leave much unsaid, and might even invite internal contradictions. Unlike the written text, the audiovisual essay forces the author to work “with those aspects that do not fit our approach (especially if they are formal aspects).” (Álvarez López and Martin 2014b) They cannot be ignored because “they appear on the screen or on the soundtrack,” forcing the essayist, as Adrian Martin poignantly put it, to push his research “wherever the film leads you.” (Martin 2014)

The essayist's work can thus be seen as forever *unfinished*. The essay becomes the shorthand for a process of discovery that was undertaken during the production of the video. Therefore, its digital affordances make the audiovisual essay more important as a *method* and as a *process*, rather than just as a "promising communicative tool with different affordances than those of written text." (Grant 2014a, 50) Many authors of digital audiovisual essays have insisted on this point. Digital technologies allow, according to Catherine Grant, a shift "from theory to methodology" (Catherine Grant, in Álvarez López et al. 2014) that makes the process of directly experimenting with the sounds and images of a film (or films) as important as the completed audiovisual essay that is presented publicly, and more important than the material illustration of a predetermined theoretical point. Accordingly, Grant has preferred to describe her work as "videographic experiments" (Grant 2013) or, alternatively, as an activity of "essaying," rather than the production of (finished) "essays" (Grant 2014e). In doing so, she is taking up Christian Keathley's suggestion that "lots of experimenting must be done," (Keathley 2011; Grant 2014e), not because this is necessary for the audiovisual essay to find a stable research method, but because experimenting *is the method* of the digital audiovisual essay.¹⁹ Grant has developed this idea further, arguing that the possibility of directly manipulating the moving image enables the digital audiovisual essay's process of discovery. This experience starts with, but extends well beyond, the "ludic sovereignty" (Michelson 1990, quoted in Grant 2014a) over the film. Once limited to specialized editors and their expensive and complex editing tables, this 'sovereignty' has now been transferred to every user of a personal computer equipped with editing software —and more recently, to the users of smartphones and tablets with progressively sophisticated editing apps. The use of non-linear editing software allows, for example, sequences to be moved repeatedly in and out of their original contexts, new sounds or music to be juxtaposed within a sequence²⁰, the flow of the moving image to be changed, or

¹⁹ Keathley has also rejected the use of "essay" in the description of these works because, in his view, the term "is synonymous with the explanatory, and thus carries with it certain assumptions and expectations," (2012) that would narrow the desirably open field of expressive experimentation that should characterize this practice.

²⁰ Much like the mask method suggested by Michel Chion (1994).

different shots compared using a multiple-screen effect. All these practices constitute a form of manipulation that, for Grant, “created the sensation of ‘touching the film object,’ at least *virtually*, as a digital, or digitized, artefact accessed through a graphical user interface.” (Grant 2014a) Through this “touching” and manipulation of the moving image, some knowledge about its fundamental features emerges, namely the understanding that audiovisual meaning has a relational nature. However, this understanding is of a special kind because it results less from intellectual reasoning than from perceptual *action*. Grant uses the heideggerian concept of *handling* to speak of the digital audiovisual essay as “a form of understanding with the hands and eyes” (Grant 2014a) and in which knowledge is acquired in the context of a “relation of care and concerned dealings, not a relation where the world is set before us (knowing subjects) as an object.” (Bolt 2004; quoted in Grant 2014a) This quality of the audiovisual essay transforms it, in other words, into a form of “material thinking” (Grant 2014a) in which the thinking about cinema is done through the manipulation of its materials —or more precisely, of the digital versions which afford this form of manipulation (the files that feed digital viewing and editing software). In the digital audiovisual essay, *knowledge* about the moving image is generated through the practitioner’s hands and eyes, that watch the computer screen, literally displacing images and sounds across the space of the editing software’s timeline, the result of instructions entered by the touch of a keyboard button or a mouse movement.

Knowledge is acquired as a process that involves trial and error, and a personal, intimate relation to the moving image, in which it ceases to be seen as something alien to the spectator, but instead as something that now proceeds, at least in part, from his performative, creative relation to it. In Catherine Grant’s experience, “the more I allowed myself to respond freely to the material as I was experiencing it through the audiovisual, spatiotemporal affordances of my editing programme with ‘a gestural use of editing’, the more new knowledge about the film I seemed to produce.” (Grant 2014a, 53) Kevin B. Lee has developed a particular compositional method, which he termed “desktop documentary,” in which the editing software window —and literally, the desktop of his computer— is included in the essay (of which we have already seen a

hybrid example in this dissertation's Introduction). In this extreme case, which I will analyse in detail in chapter 3, the process of manipulating the moving image becomes the centre of the audiovisual essay's form, thus highlighting its performative and creative nature. The final version of the audiovisual essay becomes, as it were, the recording of a live, performative process of manipulation of the moving image.



Figure 3: *Touching the film object? On haptic criticism* (Catherine Grant, 2014)

The digital audiovisual essay produces a creative, affective type of knowledge and, literally, a *close* analysis that is all the more revealing the more it resists departing from the surface of the moving image. Catherine Grant convincingly applies Laura U. Marks' concept of *hapticity* to describe this type of knowledge (Marks 2004, quoted in Grant 2011). Grant has suggested that the audiovisual essay is a form of *haptic criticism*, in the sense that it provides "a grasp of what can be sensed of an object in close contact with it," and what takes place whenever "the words *don't* lift off the surface of the film object, [and whenever] they [or any of the other film-analytical elements conveyed through montage or other non-linear editing techniques and tools] *remain* on the surface of the film object" (Grant 2011; original emphasis). The proximity of words to the surface of the image means, on the one hand, the literal superimposition of written titles or of a voice-over commentary, and on the other hand, a more general resistance to an exclusively verbal-communication approach that imposes a pre-determined meaning to the audiovisual text. In this way, the

notion of haptic criticism reinforces the importance of the “superficial” manipulation of the moving image, whether “using slow motion or zoom-in effects to allow those experiencing them to close in on the grain or detail of the film image” (Grant 2011) or, more generally, using digital editing techniques to re-organize a pre-existing film object. The grainy, pixelated character of many audiovisual essays can therefore be understood in the context of this desire to touch and expose the film surface —its often amateurish look, then, is not only the result of faulty technical manipulations, but also the purposeful result of diving, as it were, into the image itself.

1.1.3. Between private and public: a collaborative and dialogical cultural practice

The digital audiovisual essay also distinguishes itself from previous film and video essayistic traditions because of its fundamentally *public* nature, which can assume both a *dialogical* and a *collaborative* aspect. Unlike the filmic and video varieties, the digital audiovisual essay is not circumscribed to film festivals, the art-house exhibition circuit, or the even more constrained circulation of private video copies. Digital audiovisual essays have an *online* existence, which massively extends their audience. They are distributed and accessed almost exclusively on the Internet, via blogs, news aggregator websites, and online video sharing platforms such as Vimeo and YouTube. It is true that some audiovisual essays are restricted to password-protected pedagogical websites (like David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson’s *Film Art* companion videos at McGraw-Hill’s *Connect* platform), or to DVD extras. However, these are residual examples that often become available online at some point and that were heavily influenced by online examples in the first place. The online existence of contemporary audiovisual essays is important not only because of the massive audience they can thus reach, but also because of the *dialogical* context of this particular mode of circulation and reception. In the context of the Web 2.0, spectators are encouraged to comment, share, and even to produce audiovisual responses to those essays. This is not a hypothetical possibility, but a *common practice*, often

discussed and enthusiastically welcomed by audiovisual essayists as a central feature of their work. Matthias Stork's *Chaos Cinema* (2011) was a two-part audiovisual essay about contemporary action cinema that generated an intense debate in the comments section of *Indiewire's PressPlay* blog, where it was originally released, but also in numerous other websites and in print publications²¹. Stork later made a supplement to the essay, where he systematically replied to the critical responses his work had generated (*Chaos Cinema Part III*, 2011).

The critical response to an audiovisual essay can also take the form of a new essay. In a recent example, Kevin B. Lee's *Rejecting Neorealism: Fellini and Antonioni* (2014) can be seen as a response to ::kogonada's *What is Neorealism?* (2013), to whom Lee dedicates his essay. Lee challenged ::kogonada's rather normative understanding of neorealism as exclusively characterised by a depiction of reality unencumbered by narrative action. Accordingly, while ::kogonada focuses on the exemplary case of Vittorio De Sica, and on one particular movie, *Terminal Station* (1953), Lee, in turn, provocatively chooses two segments of a collective movie made in the same year, *Love in the City* (1953), which illustrate the heterogeneity of neorealism, and more specifically the moment when it was arguably rejected by Fellini and Antonioni²².

²¹ For example, *BadAssDigest*, *Chud*, *IFC*, *SlashFilm*, *The New York Times*, and *The Week*. See, also, the comments section for the video essay at *indiewire*: http://blogs.indiewire.com/pressplay/video_essay_matthias_stork_calls_out_the_chaos_cinema; Stork (2013).

²² On ::kogonada's essay, see Keathley (2014); on Lee's *Rejecting neorealism*, see Lee (2014c).



Figure 4: *What is Neorealism?* (::kogonada, 2013)



Figure 5: *Rejecting Neorealism* (Kevin B. Lee, 2014)

Lee also provides a good example of the *collaborative* aspect of the digital audiovisual essay. In his *Shooting Down Pictures* project, he often procured the participation of film critics and scholars who might have previously authored written texts about the films he brings under his essayistic lens (he worked, amongst many others, with David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson, Paolo Cherchi Usai, Jonathan Rosenbaum, Nicole Brenez, Richard Brody, Girish Shambu, and Chris Fujiwara)²³. The level of collaboration between Lee and the invited authors is varied, ranging from the reading of a commentary to the pitching of creative ideas. The collaborative nature of the audiovisual essay can also manifest itself in the participation of fellow essayists. Such is the case, for example, of the

²³ For more details on these essays and on the *Shooting Down Pictures* project, see Lee (2009).

collective essays made by David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, or Cristina Álvarez López and Adrian Martin²⁴.

The dialogical and collaborative nature of the digital audiovisual essay underlines, once again, its importance as an on-going process that is not completed once the work is published online. On the contrary, the online publication of the essay merely leads to a new phase, in which the author of the essay receives (more or less) instant critical responses to his work, which might lead to corrections or even to new essays. In this sense, the online publication of the essay functions as a “sort of virtual lab-studio-workshop-conference space-debate and discussion,” that opens up “an active viewing space within the duration of the video for *live co-research*: a framed experience for *participant observation*” (Grant 2014e; my emphasis). But this dialogical aspect of the online publication also contributes to making *spectators* aware of the processual nature of the essay, *as they are watching it*. If we extend Grant’s words, online spectators of the essay are the *participant observers* of its lessons, *regardless* of whether they will later comment or otherwise respond to the essay or not. Spectators of the digital audiovisual essays are involved in a two-step spectatorial *mise-en-abîme*. First, because they are watching someone else’s spectatorial experiences—that is, the spectatorial experiences of the author of the video essay. And secondly, because they are watching those second-hand spectatorial experiences in the same digitally mediated context in which they were originally produced: the same digital, non-linear viewing technologies that generated the spectatorial experiences of the essay’s author in the first place. In the process, the digital audiovisual essay clearly takes up its filmic predecessor’s defining characteristic of thinking *publicly* about a *private* experience (Corrigan 2011, 6). This is not a form of exhibitionism, but rather a method to subvert, or indeed to dilute, a “coherent subjectivity within the public experience of the everyday” (Corrigan 2011, 33), while also acknowledging that the intimate self is inevitably entangled with “the public Other that surrounds a self.” (2011, 55) Like the essay film before it, the digital essay promotes an “encounter between the self and the

²⁴ I am referring to Bordwell and Thompson’s *Film Connect* series, in collaboration with Criterion, an example of which can be found at YouTube (*Ellyptical Editing: Vagabond (1985) Agnès Varda*, 2012); and Martin and Álvarez López *Intimate Catastrophes* (2013).

public domain (...) that measures the limits and possibilities of each as a conceptual activity” (2011, 6). However, the online, dialogical and collaborative contexts of this encounter, together with the double *mise-en-abîme* that characterizes the viewing situations of digital spectatorship, make the spectator, *and no longer only exclusively the essayist*, aware of the “testing of expressive subjectivity through experiential encounters in a public arena” (2011, 30) which defines not only the process of *making*, but also the act of *viewing* every digital audiovisual essay.

1.1.4. Between verbal and audiovisual communication: a self-reflexive “rich text object”

Unlike its film and video predecessors, the practice of the digital audiovisual essay is characterised by an intense self-reflexiveness, mostly carried out in written format, but also in the form of the audiovisual essay itself. Written texts often supplement its arguments, and theorise and advocate its use as an alternative research method in the field of film studies. These texts reflect on the limits and potentials of audiovisual essayism, especially in comparison with traditional forms of written scholarship and film criticism. They transform the digital audiovisual essay not only into a highly *self-reflexive* research method, but also into a *militantly defended* one. The fact that the defence of audiovisual essayism has often taken a written form is a paradox that has not gone unnoticed by many of its authors. While the written form might be seen as a necessary condition of the on-going process of academic recognition and institutionalization of the audiovisual essay, it is also another manifestation of the tense yet productive relation between audiovisual and verbal (written and oral) communication that lies at the core of the digital audiovisual essay’s rhetorical strategies.

It is very uncommon for an audiovisual essay to be presented without some *accompanying written text* that takes various forms and relates to audiovisual essays in different ways. At the very least, a short note from the author typically accompanies the publication of the essay, its length hinging on

the conventions and limitations of the publication outlet, such as a blog or a channel in a video sharing platform. Apart from contextual information about the production of the essay, these notes also generally exhibit copyright information that makes clear that the use of movie extracts has non-profit or scholarly purposes. Many of the audiovisual essays in the Indiewire blog *PressPlay* or in the personal channels of audiovisual essayists in Vimeo have such accompanying notes that also have a curatorial character. In this case, the individual responsible for the choice of a specific essay, or a selection of essays, justifies his options and, in addition to providing contextual information about each work, suggests connections between them. The posts on the *Film Studies For Free* blog, the “Curator’s notes” that accompany the publication of audiovisual essays in the online journal *[In]Transition*, or the editorial notes in *Necsus’* section “Audiovisual essays,” are all good examples of this type of accompanying text. In spite of their contextual nature and short format, the mere existence of these texts already contributes to the reflexiveness of the digital audiovisual essay practice. However, this tendency is most recognizable in the case of essays that are accompanied by full-length articles. Matthias Stork’s previously mentioned three-part audiovisual essay, *Chaos Cinema* (2011), eventually led to an oral presentation and, later, to a written article published in the *Media Fields Journal* (Stork 2013). The article expands Stork’s earlier arguments about contemporary action cinema, quoting the author’s audiovisual essay and embedding numerous movie clips within the text. In order to support the claim that the “techniques that most explicitly express chaos cinema are the *shaky-cam* and what [he] dub[s] the *crash-cam*,” (2013) Stork supplements his written arguments with his audiovisual essay *Crash-cam: Through a Lens Shattered* (2012), also embedded in the text. In this way, Stork’s article and audiovisual essay reinforce and illuminate each other. They benefit from each other’s arguments and they are, in a sense, each other’s *companion* pieces. Both are presented and quoted without hierarchical considerations (even if the audiovisual essay seems to take precedence). The article, then, serves as much to supplement the audiovisual essay as to establish the latter’s merits over traditional written scholarship. According to Stork, the “sensory firestorm of these directors’ films could only partially be expressed in written form. A digital essay could better demonstrate

the ferocity of the material at hand, and exemplify the difference between an analysis after-the-fact, after the film that is, and one that occurs right in the moment, as part of the film experience.” (Stork 2012a)

Discussion of the advantages of the audiovisual essay over written scholarship and film criticism has also been the specific object of many articles, and, unlike Stork’s article about contemporary action movies, their exclusive focus is the digital audiovisual essay itself. Quite often, these authors are audiovisual essayists who ground their arguments and reflections on their own experiences and defend their practice against the backdrop of the academy’s dominant verbal communication forms. Catherine Grant, one of the most prolific advocates of the audiovisual essay, is the author of several dozens video essays (analysed in chapter 3), and of key articles that theorise and defend its scholarly practice. In “Déjà-viewing: Videographic Experiments in Intertextual Film Studies,” (2013) she assesses the form through a commentary on six of her essays, embedded in the text. In subsequent articles (Grant and Keathley 2014; Grant 2014a; Grant 2014e), Grant furthered the theorization of the audiovisual essay, often supporting her analysis by embedding the videos under discussion in the text. Several of her articles (2013; 2014a; Grant and Keathley 2014; 2012; 2014e) echo the processual nature of her audiovisual essaying, admitting to the shortcomings of some essays and elaborating on her technical and rhetorical options. As mentioned above, it is not so much the description of a normative and definitive method that interests Grant, but rather the public sharing of a process of experimentation with the varied methodological possibilities of the digital audiovisual essay —such as it developed, individually, in the making of each video.

Unsurprisingly, Grant is not keen to over-explain her own work. Her articles do not hold the keys to understanding all her choices, nor are they eager to exhaust all the layers of meaning that her videographic recombinations afford. If this is obvious enough both in her audiovisual essays and in her articles, it is even more so when one considers the original publication context of many of her videos in the *Filmanalytical* blog²⁵. Here, she often accompanied the publication of a video not only with a short contextual note, but also with a series of quotes

²⁵ <http://filmanalytical.blogspot.com/>

from articles by other authors about the analysed film, as well as a list of links to even more articles about the same film or subject. These texts are not there to illuminate or explain the audiovisual essay. They are, instead, and much like the essay itself, geared towards commenting on the film object under analysis. Therefore, the audiovisual essay *and* the quoted and linked articles are both part of an on-going research about a particular film object. *Reading* and *watching* become equal, complementary activities, both open and incomplete, commenting on each other and contributing, as a whole, to the analysis of the film text. We could, then, generalize from Girish Gambu's (2014) comment on Grant's audiovisual essay *Intersection* (2014)²⁶—about Wong Kar-wai's *In the Mood of Love* (2000)—, whose publication in *Filmanalytical* was accompanied by a series of quotes from different critics and scholars (Grant 2014c). Grant's audiovisual essays are “not intended as a pure, stand-alone work;” they are conceived, instead, as “a central element in a *cluster* of artifacts” that includes numerous texts about the same film object (Shambu 2014; original emphasis)²⁷. This “cluster” mode of presentation literally makes visible the *performative activation of intersections* between different ideas, concepts and film objects that is constitutive of the audiovisual essay's methodology, as well as of many of the spectatorial experiences from which it was originally derived. These spectatorial experiences, which are continued in the explorations undertaken by the audiovisual essay, are not brought to a halt at the moment of its online publication. The “cluster” mode of presentation allows Grant to inscribe her work within a network of intertextual relations that the reader/spectator can re-enact and pursue on his own, leading up to paths unintended and unforeseen by the essayist. It is important to underline that, in this context, the audiovisual essay is only one more *node* (albeit a central one) in a network of intertextual relations. In fact, and as Shambu points out, this mode of presentation suggests a spectatorial experience—and a notion of cinephilia—that does not just involve watching the films, but also “involves thinking, talking, reading and writing about them.” (Shambu 2014) Thus, the mode of presentation of Grant's audiovisual

²⁶ *Intersection* (2014) was made in collaboration with Chiara Grizaffi and Denise Liege.

²⁷ Both Kevin B. Lee's *Shooting Down Pictures* blog, and the online journal *[In]Transitions* would also be good examples of this “cluster” mode of presentation.

essays does not preclude verbal communication. On the contrary, she takes full advantage of the relation between audiovisual and verbal forms of communication in a way that indeed resonates with the productive tension between the two elements in her own digital audiovisual essays.

Audiovisual essayists must navigate between two extreme positions. On the one hand, they must come to terms with the tradition that defines the essay film through the presence of an oral commentary. Philip Lopate, for example, is adamant that an essay film “must have words, in the form of a text either spoken, subtitled or intertitled” (Lopate 1992, 19, quoted in Lavik 2012b). More recently, and in much less adamant terms, Laura Rascaroli suggested that, while not necessarily defining the essay film as such, verbal commentary was central to the public reception of the form as essayistic. The absence of verbal commentary would mean, Rascaroli argued, that “the spectator might not easily experience that film as an essay, in the same way in which she might enter into a dialogue with a film that uses both visual *and* verbal language.” (2009, 37; my emphasis)

On the other hand, digital audiovisual essayists must also negotiate the weight of an opposite tradition, one that is suspicious of the verbal, and especially of the oral commentary, in the context of cinematic expression. This tradition is founded upon the demonization of the voice-over commentary, the hallmark of the classical Griersonian documentary, in a process that established modern documentary traditions, such as the north-American direct cinema, and the French *cinéma vérité*²⁸. The voice-over commentary entered the digital audiovisual essay not only through the modern documentary tradition, but also, and more importantly, via the DVD audio commentary and the documentary extra traditions²⁹. The debate about the use of voice-over commentary in the digital audiovisual essay, as in the DVD audio commentaries, inherits the two opposing views about this technique. In DVD commentaries, as Adrian Martin complains, “the voice ‘leads’. It is the voice which has authority —more than the original images and sounds of the movie.” (Martin 2012a) But other authors have suggested that the use of verbal language is the enabling feature of the digital

²⁸ See, for example, Nowell-Smith (2008); Saunders (2007); and Nichols (1991).

²⁹ On the influence of the DVD extra, see Grant (2008); Hagener (2014); and Martin (2012a and 2012b).

audiovisual essay's critical potential. To Erlend Lavik, the most accomplished "audiovisual film criticism" will be the one in which text still "does the heavy lifting in opening its author's mind to us." (Lavik 2012b) However, to anchor the identity of the audiovisual essay on either the presence or the absence of the written and spoken word might prove equally misleading and to emphasise the presence of words would be to forget that they are just one amongst many competing audiovisual rhetorical strategies. The effectiveness and persuasive power of verbal communication is not absolute but relational, and is to be measured against the other elements of the moving image. To denounce the "illusion of omniscience" (Rascaroli 2009, 45) of the voice-over as a permanent effect of this technique would be to forget the many parameters of oral commentaries (such as timbre, rhythm, relation to music and other sounds, the gender of the narrator and so on), that might work to debunk the audiovisual discourse (not to mention, the authority of the filmic enunciator itself)³⁰. Finally, the diametrically opposed view, that words should be banished from the audiovisual essay, would relinquish the possibility of using them "imaginatively and inventively" (Martin 2012b), in graphic and typographic ways capable of mobilising the "diverse strategies of 'spacing' and spatialisation, separation and associative combination," (Martin 2012b) of both the verbal- and the audiovisual elements of the moving image. To forego the use all those strategies and formal elements would be to renounce all there is to gain "from exploring the possibilities of this 'infinite semiosis'." (Álvarez López and Martin 2014a)

Even audiovisual essayists who have eliminated oral commentary in their work have not done the same with other verbal elements. On the contrary, and like many of her fellow audiovisual essayists, Grant uses text and typography in the form of titles, captions, quotes, as well as diagrams. Their role as verbal language signs is often ambiguous. The typographic elements of a title or a written quote, its colour or animated movement can attain a visual, image-like quality. These elements can be used in creative, as well as explanatory ways. They can draw attention to the verbal elements of the film object, or drive the spectator away from it, establishing connections with other films, ideas, and

³⁰ See, in this respect, Laura Rascaroli's (2009) compelling analyses of the use of the voice-over technique in Harun Farocki and Jean-Luc Godard's films.

concepts. Words, in short, prevent audiovisual essays from being “purely audiovisual,” transforming them instead, as Grant nicely put it, in “rich text objects” (Grant 2014e). Her work has become illustrative of the changing *economy* of the functions of word and image, and of a perception of the task of the digital audiovisual essayist as not so much the utopian one “of delivering a new, single, fused audiovisual language but, rather, [of] seizing the possibilities inherent in exploring expression *across* forms and media.” (Martin 2012b; original emphasis)

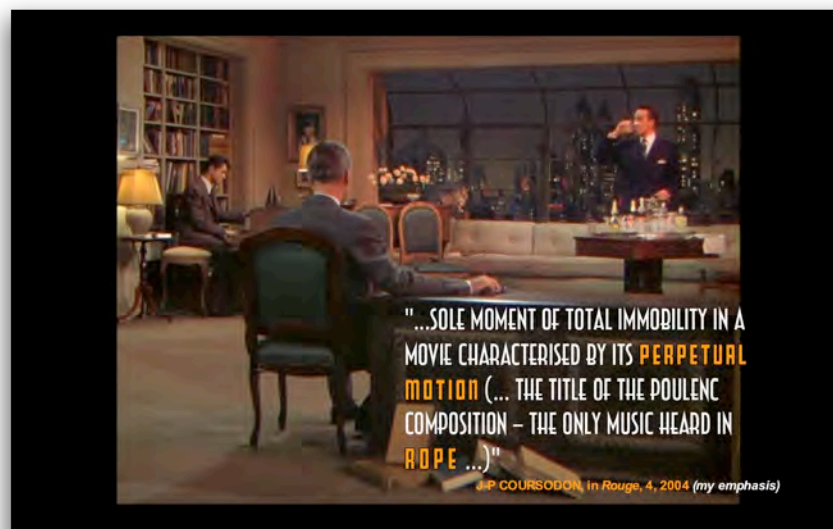


Figure 6: *Skipping Rope (Through Hitchcock's Joins)* (Catherine Grant, 2012)

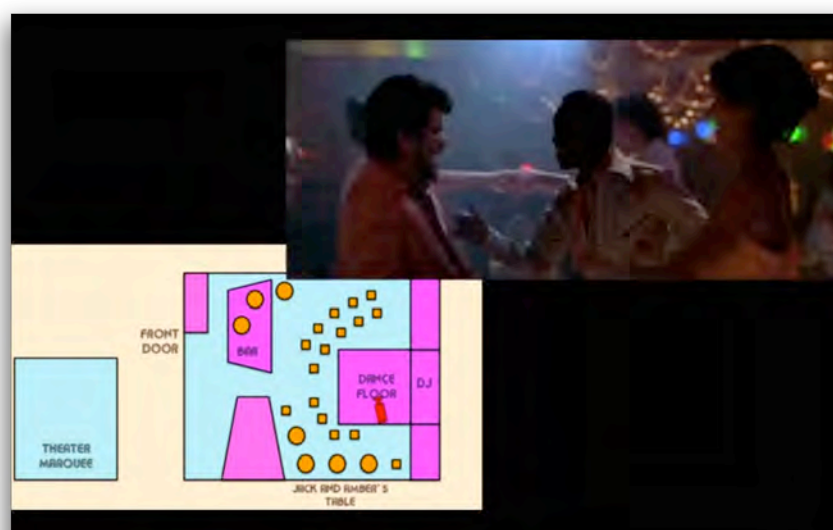


Figure 7: *Steadicam Progress: The Career of Paul Thomas Anderson in Five Shots* (Kevin B. Lee, 2012)

Verbal communication is, then, not important in itself, nor is it a predominant element that alone would define the essay, but one *amongst* the digital audiovisual essay's *many* rhetorical strategies. Nevertheless, this is not to say that words cannot play an important role in their construction. The use of words, whether written or spoken, has come in fact to distinguish the audiovisual essay from previous film and video essayistic traditions. Not only do digital editing technologies facilitate the inclusion of verbal-base elements (and specifically, of the *written* word) in audiovisual essays, but their online publication is accompanied, as I have pointed out, by written texts that extend the dialogue between words and images and transform the essays and those articles into, as it were, *reciprocal companion pieces*. I am not suggesting that the critical potential of the audiovisual essay is limited to its verbal-based elements. On the contrary, these elements offer a chance to perceive the digital audiovisual essay as a form of "creative criticism" (Martin 2012b) where the poetic and the explanatory powers of images, sounds and graphic marks can be combined with that of (oral and written) words —which can never be productively done away with, either inside the essay, or in its accompanying texts. Therefore, while it might be correct to say that the use of verbal elements is a crucial component of the digital audiovisual essay, this definition might not be enough. Perhaps it is necessary to add that, given the wide variety of intricate combinations of words, sounds and images that characterize it, the digital audiovisual essay can more accurately be defined by the continuous *appraisal* of the different contributions of *both* verbal *and* audiovisual forms of communication to the production of knowledge about cinema.

1.1.5. Between watching and making: the pedagogical potential of the digital audiovisual essay

Like the essay film, the digital audiovisual essay has an important pedagogical potential. Audiovisual essays communicate their authors' findings about specific films (and spectatorial experiences) to a public audience. However, the activity of audiovisual *essaying* can also have, as we have seen, a learning potential of its

own. The author of a digital essay will learn as much during its production as the spectator who watches the finished video. It is in this sense that the digital audiovisual essay distinguishes itself from its film and video predecessors as, unlike them, it has become an important pedagogical *tool* for students and teachers alike, in an academic context and, particularly, inside the classroom. Here, the use of the audiovisual essays allows the teacher to extend his or her own pedagogical abilities. The digital essay is, within this frame, an educational resource that allows teachers not only to *argue* their points but also to *show* them and, even, to have the students *experience* them. David Bordwell's audiovisual essays are strikingly reminiscent of the classroom context because of their structure, rhetorical strategies, and distribution outlets. While this might seem like a handicap, it is nonetheless true that these essays establish the classroom as an often-neglected source of the digital audiovisual essay.

In late 2012 and 2013, Bordwell published two "video lectures" on his and Kristin Thompson's blog *Observations on Film Art*. Both videos were intended as substitutes for talks that Bordwell had taken from his lecture circuit: the first, *How Motion Pictures Became the Movies* (2012), explores the key stylistic developments of the period between 1908-1920; the second, *CinemaScope: The Modern Miracle You See Without Glasses* (2013), tackles the history of wide formats in American and international cinema. As the author explains, the format is "a PowerPoint presentation that runs as a video, with my scratchy voice-over. I didn't write a text, but rather talked it through as if I were presenting it live." (Bordwell 2013b) In the accompanying blog posts, Bordwell suggests that both videos are suited for general audiences and that they might even be a way to encourage spectators to later engage with the author's written work, either in print or available online³¹. But the familiar PowerPoint slide show format and the long duration of the videos (69 and 52 minutes) make the "video lecture" more apt for classroom use. Bordwell is even careful to note, in relation to the first, that if "a teacher wants to break it into two parts, there's a natural stopping point around the 35-minute mark." (Bordwell 2013b) These video lectures are, in a sense, a *stand-alone object* that promotes the work of an

³¹ Much of that material is available for download from the blog in the form of posts, PDF files and e-books.

absent scholar. The videos are a further development of how Bordwell and Thompson have used the Internet for disseminating access to their books and articles. While the scholar might not be physically present, both his work, and his recorded lecture become available to the student, or the casual cinephile. In this sense, not only do the video lectures exist in relation to other (written) texts, they in fact, repeat previously published information, which the spectator is encouraged to read. In the case of the *CinemaScope...* video lecture, the accompanying blog post encourages the reading of a book chapter that Bordwell has written on the same subject. “Think of the lecture as the DVD and the chapter as the accompanying booklet,” Bordwell suggests. And he adds: “You can go to the essay if you want to dig deeper into the subject, see other examples of what I’m talking about, or learn the sources for my arguments.” (Bordwell 2013c) Bordwell’s video lectures are, then, not a research method, but a pedagogical tool that explains *previously published research*. Their role is as much to bring the work and the physical body of the scholar to where he cannot be, as to entice the spectators of the video lecture to engage with Bordwell and Thompson’s written work.

The integration within the classroom context was the explicit purpose of Bordwell and Thompson’s 2012 series of twenty “video tutorials.” The videos are narrated by Bordwell or Thompson and use extracts from films edited in the Criterion Collection to illustrate the authors’ textbook *Film Art: An Introduction*, more specifically the “chapters on the four types of film technique: mise-en-scene, cinematography, editing, and sound.” (Bordwell 2012a) A continuation of Bordwell and Thompson’s pioneering use of original still enlargements to illustrate their textbook, these audiovisual essays are seen by the authors as a powerful teaching aid that makes it “as if the sort of examples we use in *Film Art* have sprung to life” (Bordwell 2012a). The videos are available on McGraw-Hill’s password-protected website *Connect* only to licensed users (‘Connect for Bordwell, *Film Art: An Introduction*, 10e’ 2013).³² They are intended as a pedagogical extension of the textbook, but, in addition to these “video tutorials,”

³² Two examples have been published online: *Elliptical Editing: Vagabond (1985) Agnès Varda* (Kristin Thompson, 2012) and *Constructive Editing: Pickpocket (1959) Robert Bresson* (David Bordwell, 2012).

the Connect website contains a number of “interactive activities” that also include stills and movie extracts designed to test students’ knowledge of the critical analysis vocabulary of each chapter of *Film Art*.

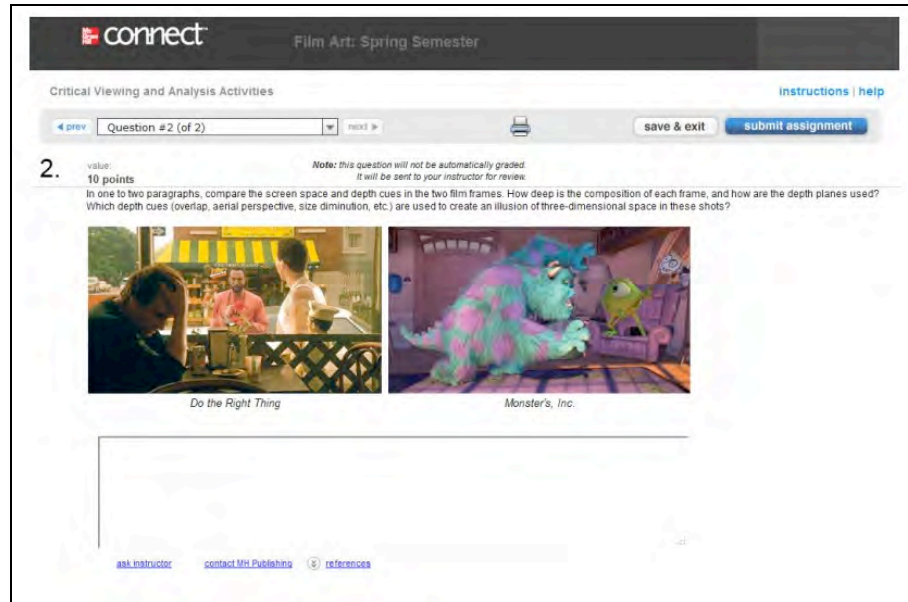


Figure 8: Connect website

Bordwell and Thompson’s audiovisual essays are part of a set of pedagogical tools that strives to expand the textbook’s original purpose “to blend the point of view of the critic or analyst with the point of view of the filmmaker” (Bordwell 2012a). Students are encouraged to imagine themselves as filmmakers, and to think as filmmakers in order to better understand the choices that have shaped the films that are the object of their analysis. The authors of *Film Art* had to admit that it wasn’t necessarily a “great stretch” for students to put themselves in “the filmmaker’s shoes,” since many of them probably had already shot movies with their smartphones, maybe even edited them before sharing the result online. Of course, students might not be aware of the choices involved in their casual filmmaking experiences. That is the deliberate purpose of the scholars and teachers who involve their students in the *production* of digital audiovisual essays. These teachers are not interested in adding the audiovisual essay to their pedagogical tools; they do not want students to *imagine* themselves as filmmakers; they want them, rather, to actually *become* filmmakers—or at least, *audiovisual essayists*.

The production of digital audiovisual essays by students, for pedagogical purposes, is one of the form's distinguishing features in relation to the film and video forms. It allows students to engage in a self-conscious filmmaking practice that will, in turn, provide them with insights not only about the choices inherent to the filmmaking process, but also about their own spectatorial experiences. Enabling students to make their own audiovisual essays is, in other words, a way of passing on to them the rich epistemological discoveries that the scholar has already experienced while engaging with this research method. Christian Keathley has been enabling students to produce their own digital audiovisual essays in the context of an academic course in Middlebury College (Keathley 2012). In his reflections about his experience, Keathley makes it clear that the practice of the digital audiovisual essay in the classroom, by the students, is still in its infancy. It is limited to the schools that can afford the equipment and the technical staff, and that are willing to entertain such learning experiments. Like Bordwell, Keathley argues that the audiovisual essay is not a technological challenge for the students. In fact, he explains, students are not only sufficiently acquainted with video and computer skills, but they are also "familiar with a variety of multi-media works that might be described as non-scholarly or quasi-scholarly —mash-ups, remixes, etc." (Keathley 2012)—, whose formal strategies are easily adoptable by the digital audiovisual essay. When engaging with the digital audiovisual essay, then, students can be seen to be pursuing, in a self-conscious and highly reflexive way, the para-analytical activities already inherent to the production and viewing of popular cultural forms typical of digitally mediated audiovisual culture, into which the audiovisual essay easily fits in. If the technological requirements, as well as the methods and forms of audiovisual essaying, might not prove too challenging to students, the same might not be true of its encouragement of a different type of knowledge, more poetic than explanatory, and one whose motivation is more intimate and emotional than guided by the academic research agenda. Students "are not typically asked to engage so intimately with their objects of study, but rather to keep them at a 'critical distance'." (Keathley 2012) However, the audiovisual essay encourages students to depart from, and at the same time explore personal cinephile canons, and to illuminate specific films as well as their individual

spectatorial experiences. The result could not be farther from Bordwell's scholarly "video tutorials," and resembles instead "the art-about-cinema from conceptual artists like Douglas Gordon, Mark Lewis, and Cindy Bernard" (Keathley 2012).

While most of these videos are not necessarily intended to outlive the classroom, some of them have. We need only think of the aforementioned examples of Matthias Stork (2012a) and Erlend Lavik (2012b), to which one could add Aitor Gametxo's widely discussed work on D.W. Griffith's *The Sunbeam* (1912) (Groo 2012)³³. In every instance, these authors' audiovisual essaying has been developed in a teaching context, not as a pedagogical tool to assist the teacher, but as a research method explored by the students themselves. The role of the audiovisual essay as an instrument that contributes to their transition from the position of the student to that of the scholar is also not to be neglected—although this is limited by the degree of acceptance the audiovisual essay has already achieved in a given academic context.

In spite of their success beyond the classroom, it is worth noting that some of the most distinguished features of the digital audiovisual essay are intrinsic to what we might call the *teaching situation*. Keathley described the organization of his course as a "quasi-collaborative" (2012) *workshop* because, in spite of being handed individual assignments, all students are working on the same film, and can thus more easily comment on their colleagues' work, as well as feel stimulated by their colleagues' progress. This model seems to confirm Raymond Bellour's suggestion that "filmic analysis may be, more than a kind of writing, the privileged object of an activity of teaching." (2010, 17) In the teaching situation—and in the *seminar* model in particular—the processual nature of audiovisual essaying is made apparent, as it is "elaborated *in vivo*" (Bellour 2010, 17), that is, in a performative way, which means that the notion that the analysis is finished—i.e., fixated in a written form—is forever postponed. Here, the presence of the projected moving image, the predominance of the spoken word (both the teacher's and the students'), and the collaborative nature of the analysis, all underline the nature of filmic analysis as an on-going, unfinished method. In the context of the classroom, therefore, the digital

³³ Gametxo's audiovisual essay is analysed in chapter 3.

audiovisual essay reveals itself as a necessarily incomplete process that is responsible for leaving a “great many analyses (and among the most accomplished) (...) at the stage one could call happy.” (2010, 17)

The digital audiovisual essay prolongs this happy stage, before the filmic analysis is pinned down into a definitive version by the written word, with a research method that seems especially resistant to closure and to choosing between the different elements that can fertilize it (the audiovisual, the written text and the spoken word). In this sense, and to come full circle, back to the beginning of this chapter, the digital audiovisual essay is best described as a *lesson in looking* not only for those who watch it, but also, and more importantly, for those who practice it.

Concluding remarks

The digital audiovisual essay is a new cultural practice that continues, but also distinguishes itself from, its film and video predecessors. It is also influenced by the DVD audio commentary and the classroom context, not only as a result of its integration of verbal communication elements, but also because the digital essay is to a great extent the audiovisual record of the essayist’s performative, collaborative, and public investigation of his or her own spectatorial experiences. The methodologies of the digital audiovisual essay are varied, covering a wide range of formal strategies that echo the backgrounds of the essayists, as well as the purpose and context of their work’s publication. These strategies may lean more towards audiovisual or verbal elements —the presence of a voice-over continues to be highly debated and experimented with—, but the duration of the essays may also vary (from short pieces to longer, even multi-part ones), as may the use of little or extensive editing, of single or multiple-screens, and of greater or lesser manipulation of the used images’ original features (through intended or unintended pixellation, or superimpositions effects, for example). As a result, some essays may display a more explanatory purpose, others a more poetic tone, even if the distinction between the two stances is nuanced and their use is often more complementary than mutually exclusive. Some are published and

discussed in the context of film criticism, as an extension of traditional written film reviews in specialized blogs or print magazines, others pursue the tradition of film analysis and circulate in the academic context, either in lectures or conferences, or in specialized blogs and even in peer-reviewed publications. Others, still, borrow from fan culture and cinephilia and are made and distributed online in blogs and fan pages, drawing heavily on other fan-produced audiovisual forms, such as supercuts and other types of compilation of pre-existent moving images.

When scholars, film critics and students alike practice the audiovisual essay they are, in a sense, merely taking full advantage of the affordances of digital viewing and editing technologies to replicate in a reflexive, self-conscious way their everyday, casual encounters with cinema —and many other audiovisual texts— and the inevitable epistemological discoveries that come with those encounters. However, the audiovisual essay's ability to critique the audiovisual culture of which it is, after all, an integral part, has also been a source of explicit concern for at least one essayist. Kevin B. Lee has shown concern with the fact that many audiovisual essays were little more than “an onslaught of supercuts, list-based montages and fan videos that do less to shed critical insight into their source material than offer a new way for the pop culture snake to eat its long tail.” (Lee 2013a) And so, he asks,

“Does this type of production herald an exciting new era for media literacy, enacting Alexandre Astruc's prophecy of cinema becoming our new lingua franca? Or is it just an insidious new form of media consumption?” (Lee 2013a)

Lee's concerns echo Adorno's cautionary remarks about the essay form itself. The essay, Adorno warned, could easily capitulate and end up effecting the “neutralizing transformation of cultural artifacts into commodities” (1984, 154). The danger lies with the ambivalence of the essay method itself, capable of generating both the barthesian “essay-as-experiment,” or the “essay-as-business-as-usual, the conservative and normative op-ed-‘think piece’” (Álvarez López and Martin 2014a). However, to distinguish between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ iterations of the essay would be to miss the point entirely. This is more than just an issue of

definition and gatekeeping, that is, of what an audiovisual essay is and is not, and of who gets to decide that. The contemporary audiovisual essay's ability to *shed critical insight into its source material* is not incompatible with its functioning as *a new form of audiovisual consumption*. In fact, the two functions complement and reinforce each other. The contradictory tensions that are constitutive of the digital audiovisual essay are also what make it such an exemplary text of digitally mediated culture. But is this really new?

2. The double logic of the digital audiovisual essay

In the previous chapter, I suggested five distinguishing features that have characterised the practice of digital audiovisual essaying since the mid-2000s. This is not, of course, the same as to posit the absolute *novelty* of the digital audiovisual essay. Many of the features discussed in the previous chapter warrant its definition as a ‘new’ cultural form —such as its exploration of the critical affordances of digital technologies, or its existence in the context of Web 2.0. However, its methodological openness and hostility to the conventional grammar of thought, as well as its continued reliance on montage also justify the inclusion of the digital essay in the tradition of previously existing audiovisual modes of critical thought such as the essay film, experimental and avant-garde cinema, as well as the modern documentary.

In this chapter, which could be described as a long appraisal of the ‘newness’ of the digital audiovisual essay, I suggest a thread in which it can be discussed as a *new* cultural form based on *old* formal operations. The affordances of digital editing and viewing technologies have put the formal operations that once characterised modernist practices such as *montage*, once again at the centre of the formal and rhetorical strategies that characterise many contemporary audiovisual texts, and that shape the digital audiovisual essay in particular. In its editing and compositional strategies, the audiovisual essay takes up the strategies of *fragmentation*, *recombination*, and *repetition*, and accordingly, the tradition of *reflexivity* that is strongly reminiscent of traditional interpretations of modernism. Also characterised by the reflexive use of editing and the recombination of previously existing moving images, digital essaying is interested in what this playful manipulation can tell us about the conditions of existence of these texts in the context of mass, digitally mediated audiovisual culture. Through its investigation of the principles of fragmentation and recombination, montage not only foregrounds the organization and presentation of moving images, but also the ways in which the spectators perceive them.

Furthermore, the digital manipulation of the flow of moving images allows montage to achieve the literal slowing down of the imagery of consumer culture thus offering the chance to comment on not only the semiotic, but also the material qualities and the conditions of production, circulation and reception of digitally mediated audiovisual texts. These reflexive strategies thus become key to understand the spatial, temporal, and material qualities of the moving image, as well as its conditions of existence as a material text that exists in a network of technological, social, and economic relations.

However, other interpretations of modernism and its key formal operations, such as montage, draw our attention to the co-existence of *reflexivity* alongside *mimetic representation*. As the concept of *remediation* (Bolter and Grusin 2000) has shown, every act of mediation must be seen as simultaneously drawing attention to the representational device *and* to what is being represented. The perceived prevalence of one or the other will define specific historical moments and technological configurations, but this is not to say that during the height of Soviet cinema, to give one example from the history of cinema that is especially relevant to the contemporary digital audiovisual essay, mimetic representation was altogether absent. In other words, montage enacts the double logic of remediation by calling attention both to the mimetic representation of moving images *and* to the acts of technological mediation that make such representation possible. This *double logic of remediation* requires an active viewing process that makes the spectator aware of the intellectual *and* material conditions of textual and subject formation, and thus of the fundamental *homology* between the work of the author of an audiovisual text and his own work as the spectator of that text. This homology is key, I will argue, to understand the *epistemological potential* of the double logic of remediation and, hence, of the formal operations involved in montage. However, and as the historical debates about montage have shown, the ability to understand how an audiovisual text is formed, hardly constitutes any impediment to the flourishing of a-critical forms of consumerism. While carrying a rich epistemological potential, these formal operations can also be seen as simply defining the accepted and legitimate boundaries of spectatorship; albeit not negating the existence of such pre-determined spectator activity in the first

place. Furthermore, it could be argued that the recombination of previously existing texts merely serves to repurpose them and, hence, to expand the realm of audiovisual commodities available to be avidly —although not critically—watched. It would then seem problematic to argue that the epistemological potential of montage necessarily implies an univocally critical, of for that matter, emancipatory power. The double logic of remediation is an extremely useful concept because it certainly establishes the epistemological potential of many editing and compositional techniques, while nevertheless also accounting for their ambiguous relation to mass culture. Moreover, it allows an interpretation of modernism that sees it as characterised by contradictory, co-existing forces, and not exclusively by reflexivity. The concept of remediation suggests that it is more appropriate, then, to speak of the *tensions* of modernism (rather than simply of *modernism*), in the sense that its constitutive forces are the source of its epistemological potential, *but also* of its ambivalent position towards mass culture, always balancing between critique and consumerism.

The double logic of remediation also seems to characterise many of the formal operations that inform the digital audiovisual essay, not only because of its systematic use of editing to fragment, recombine, and repeat previously existing images, but also because the digital audiovisual essay uses several compositional techniques that foreground the acts of technological mediation and semiotic representation that make it possible —such as split-screens and superimpositions, the visibility of the graphical user interface (in the “desktop cinema” method), motion alterations and freeze frames, or the combination of verbal and audiovisual elements of communication. In this perspective, it becomes paramount to ask if by incorporating the double logic of remediation, the digital audiovisual essay has not inherited the tensions of modernism and its ambiguous relation to mass culture too? To answer this question, it is necessary to assess whether the affordances of digital delivery technologies have changed the double logic of remediation, its epistemological potential, and its ambiguous relation to mass culture, and if so how? I will frame this issue not only in terms of the imports of digital delivery technologies in the broader context of contemporary audiovisual culture, but also, and more specifically, in the modernism/postmodernism debates. In my perspective, digital delivery

technologies have updated and enhanced, more than surpassed, the double logic of remediation. The affordances of digital technologies have brought upon, as it were, the *internalization* of the double logic of remediation in most engagements with audiovisual texts, and accordingly, the epistemological potential of such viewing situations. Consequentially, I suggest that the epistemological potential offered by the double logic of remediation has become a constitutive element of most engagements with digitally mediated texts; it is as if the critique itself of the text is now a necessary new step of its reception. In this way, I suggest that a *dialectical interdependency* of critique and consumerism has become widely constitutive of contemporary, digitally mediated viewing situations, with the decisive consequence that montage is often reduced to play a merely pseudo-critical role, its truly emancipatory potential having been neutralised to better serve the process of consumption of the audiovisual text. In this process, there is less a distinction between critical and consumerist (a-critical) modes of reception, than the *fold* of one into the other, transforming critical activity into an integral, but purely preliminary and perfunctory gesture that has been integrated in the reception process. In other words, I will not suggest that modernism has been surpassed by digitally mediated culture, but rather that digital delivery technologies simply contribute to make modernism's tensions more evident, as well as much more disseminated and efficient.

The *politics* of the audiovisual essay, as the exemplary text of contemporary audiovisual culture, can then be appraised. The perfect illustration of the double logic of remediation in the context of contemporary audiovisual culture, the digital essay provides the opportunity to illustrate clearly that more than a binary opposition, there exists a interdependency of the two forces of critique and consumerism. More importantly, if the audiovisual essay is itself based upon the same formal strategies that serve the increment of audiovisual consumerism, its critical potential can never be presupposed. In fact, if the audiovisual is itself a product of this interdependency of critique and consumerism, we must ask how could it still play a truly critical, and indeed emancipatory role in the context of contemporary audiovisual culture?

In this chapter, therefore, the issue of the 'newness' of the digital audiovisual essay is therefore made indissociable from its *politics*, that is, from

the discussion of the ideological functions served by this cultural form. First, I will ask if the epistemological potential of montage that drives the digital audiovisual essay has been changed by recent digital delivery technologies, and if so, how? This will require not only an appraisal of the concepts of the “digital” and of “new media,” but also of the debates that ask, or that presuppose, that new digital technologies have out-dated modernism (in post-modernism). My perspective will, on the contrary, posit the continuation of the tensions of modernism, which would have been productively assimilated by capitalism to develop and encourage new forms of audiovisual consumerism, of which the digital audiovisual essay might prove a valuable example —not in spite, but precisely *because* of its contradictory and ambiguous relation to mass, digitally mediated audiovisual culture. I will end, therefore, with an appraisal of the politics and the ideological functions of the digital audiovisual essay in the context of contemporary audiovisual culture. Specifically, I will turn my attention to how the formal strategies of fragmentation and recombination might also obscure the imagination of a whole of semiotic, social and economic relations — or, more correctly, how they might invalidate the practical and political utility of imagining such totality as something on which the individual can act upon. This issue will be key to assess the specific political and ideological implications of the audiovisual essays analysed in chapter 3.

Having established this theoretical framework, I will then provide an historical account of the formal operations —such as fragmentation, repetition, and recombination— which have been systematically explored by the key modernist cultural practice of *montage*, and that still inform the editing and compositional strategies of the digital audiovisual essay. I will examine how these formal operations enact the double logic of remediation, illustrating not only the source of their rich epistemological potential, but also of specific ideological functions. I will address different uses of montage, from the tradition of Soviet cinema to the compilation film, and to the contemporary Remix, to illustrate not only the varied degrees of the *interdependency* of critique and consumerism, but also the domestication of the critical potential of editing, such as it has been internalized by digitally mediated audiovisual culture. Finally, I will discuss the Situationist strategy of *détournement* as an example of an

emancipatory practice of montage, one that directly challenges the passive, legal and pseudo-critical role attributed to the spectator of contemporary mass audiovisual culture. This historical account of montage will frame the possibilities, but also the limits, of the epistemological affordances of the key formal strategies of the digital audiovisual essay.

To conclude, rather than presupposing that the digital audiovisual essay is an absolute novelty and that its critical potential is univocally effective and benign, the chief objective of this chapter is to put it into the historical context of the tensions that shaped modernism and, accordingly, of the latter's constitutively ambiguous relation to mass culture. To analyse the history of montage is instrumental to understanding the methods on which the digital audiovisual essay grounds its own double logic of remediation and, consequentially, its own epistemological potential. This will further allow us to recognize that the digital audiovisual essay has also inherited the ambiguous relation to mass culture that has historically characterised those same formal operations. This chapter will help understanding how contemporary practices of the audiovisual essay are more or less conscious of these tensions, and specifically of the very thin line separating the domesticated from the emancipatory practices of montage. More importantly, the chapter will also ask if digital audiovisual essayists are more or less willing to resist those tensions and *divert* the epistemological potential that has been internalized in digitally mediated audiovisual culture onto a truly critical and emancipatory purpose?

2.1. Contemporary audiovisual culture and modernism

In the conclusion of one of his most recent audiovisual essays, Kevin B. Lee considers that the form was becoming “a key component of this 21st century entertainment complex”, but wonders whether essays are “a key to lock us in, or to let us out” of that same complex (audio commentary of *What Makes a Video Essay Great* (2014)). In this section, I will start by asking a different question: is this dilemma specific to the digital audiovisual essay or, for that matter, to contemporary audiovisual culture? To formulate an answer, it will be necessary

to first assess the ‘newness’ of contemporary audiovisual culture through a short survey of the topics of representation and mediation in the context of digital communication technologies. This line of enquiry will bring to the fore the longevity of a series of debates that can be traced back to the frame of modernist culture throughout the 20th century. This, in turn, will require a specific interpretation of modernism, one that sees it as marked by contradictory forms of mediation (hesitating between mimetic representation and reflexivity), and by an ambivalent relation with mass culture (waverling between critique and consumerism).

Therefore, to suggest that the audiovisual essay has become an exemplary text of digitally mediated culture means that it has not only incorporated some of the key formal operations of modernism, but also their corresponding tensions and ambiguities. I will argue that the concepts of remediation (Bolter and Grusin 2000) and interface (Galloway 2012) are especially adequate for understanding this continuity and I will suggest that the ‘newness’ of contemporary audiovisual culture is to be located in the perpetuation and enhancement of the tensions of modernism, the latter’s formal operations and ideological functions now incorporated —or, as I will suggest, *internalized*— by digital communications technologies, and having thus become much more disseminated than ever before.

To conclude, I will offer a reflection on the ideological functions that characterise contemporary audiovisual culture so as to usher in a more complex answer to Lee’s question. Perhaps the audiovisual essay is not a key that would either let us out *or* keep us locked in (the tight grip of) digitally mediated culture. As the history of modernism shows us, the answer may very well be that the key to let us out is *also* designed to further lock us in.

2.1.1 Contemporary audiovisual culture

Many of the discourses about contemporary audiovisual culture seem predetermined by the presumption of its *newness*. Even Manovich’s (2002, 50ff.)

provocative statement that cinema was the first digital media did not so much deny the newness of new media as entrench their origins deeper into the past.

A significant part of the misunderstandings attached to the notions of media change and media newness are a consequence of the ontological uncertainty introduced by recent digital technologies and, more generally, by a theoretical confusion between technology, on the one hand, and the social and cultural practices, on the other, that define a medium. Therefore, a brief review of the much debated and often conflated concepts of *new media* and the *digital* might prove useful to investigate where exactly their “newness” lies. Henry Jenkins (2006) provides a suitable distinction between a *medium* and its *delivery technologies*. Recorded sound, in his example, is a *medium*; while CDs, MP3 files or 8-track cassettes are *delivery technologies*. The latter can become obsolete and can be replaced, while the former rarely are, instead adapting and evolving to changes in the delivery technologies (2006, 13). Media are then to be defined in two ways: as a communication technology that is grounded on a *perishable* delivery technology; and as a set of social and cultural practices involved in the durable uses of such technologies. Seen from this angle, it is not so much that old media are being displaced by “new ones,” Jenkins argues, but rather that “their functions and status are shifted by the introduction of new technologies.” (2006, 14)

This is why David Rodowick is both right and wrong in his dismissal of the term “new media” when used in the context of *digital* technologies (2007, 94). He is correct in dismissing it in the sense that not only does the expression “new media” refer to “too wide a variety of computationally processed artefacts” and to “all varieties of computer-mediated communication,”³⁴ but also that in all these cases it implies “not so much the creation of a new medium or media as a reprocessing of existing print and visual artefacts into digital forms.” (2007, 94) However, he is wrong inasmuch as he fails to take into account the newness of the social and cultural practices that have become associated with digital delivery technologies.

³⁴ The same applies to “CD-ROMs; HTML authoring; interactive game design and programming; image and sound capture or synthesis, manipulation, and editing; text-processing and desktop publishing; human-computer interface design; computer-aided design” (Rodowick 2007, 94).

Lev Manovich has tried to combine both aspects of Jenkins' definition by arguing that the "reprocessing" of old media by computer-mediated forms of production and distribution is not a neutral operation. It will, so the argument goes, change culture and society, not least because it is taking place in such an unprecedented scale in history (2002, 19ff). Nonetheless, the contribution of digital technologies to the creation of new media is far from straightforward. Manovich makes the relevant point that the "digital" is a wide-scope concept that includes disparate features³⁵, not all of which necessarily contribute to the newness of digital technologies. In his example, cinema already employed a discrete form of representation (the individual images in the celluloid strip), combined different media (such as image, sound, and text), and (which is the more controversial statement) already contained the principle of non-linear access as an elementary storage system, whose images film editors could "play" with at will. On the other hand, if old media already contained digital principles, then features of digital technology such as information loss and degradation over repeated copying are hardly a novelty, and actually bring "new media" unexpectedly closer to old, analogue media, where such features were also present.

Digital delivery technologies have been introduced in developed countries since the mid-2000s. Although some of these devices (such as personal computers) and communication infrastructures (such as the Internet) have existed long before that, "the important conflux of widespread Internet coverage, sufficient data capacity, affordable devices and connectivity options, as well as appealing services" (OECD 2012, 21) did not become available until the mid-2000s. High-speed or broadband internet access became widespread in OECD countries in the period between 2004-10 (OECD 2011). In its Wi-Fi variant, mobile broadband Internet access became available on a large scale in European and North American areas and university campuses from the early 2000s onwards. Third generation (3G) mobile communications networks have been marketed since 2002, but did not become truly relevant until the development of smartphones and other portable screen devices capable of taking full advantage

³⁵ For example: "analog-to-digital conversion," or digitization, "a common representational code," and "numerical representation" (Manovich 2002, 52).

of 3G's high information transfer rates (OECD 2012, 21ff), such as Apple's first iPhone (2007) or the iPad tablet computer (2010), quickly followed by many other models and versions.³⁶ Finally, digital culture would be inconceivable without the current configuration of Web 2.0, in which the organization and presentation of multi-media information hinges on the collaboration and interaction of users with each other, and with the Internet pages they are accessing (O'Reilly 2005), thus generating the more than merely "appealing," but rather *compelling* services to which the author of the above mentioned OECD report referred. This development found its most acute expression in the creation of so-called "social media" networks such as Facebook (2004), YouTube (2006), or Twitter (2006), among many others, and had its symbolic moment of public acclamation when *Time* magazine elected "You," that is the Web 2.0 user, as the 2006 person of the year (Grossman 2006).

Keeping in mind Jenkins' distinction, I would argue that contemporary audiovisual culture is characterised by the introduction of new *digital delivery technologies* that do not entirely break with previous, analogue, delivery ones. However, contemporary audiovisual culture cannot simply be conflated with the existence of new digital delivery technologies. To appraise it correctly, one must also take into account the *social and cultural practices* afforded by those technologies. To pay heed to these practices should bring to the fore not only the *ruptures*, but also the *continuities* that characterize contemporary audiovisual culture.

Textuality and subject formation

The analysis of social and cultural practices associated with digital delivery technologies generates widely differing perspectives on contemporary audiovisual culture oscillating between the positive and the negative.

Given its importance in the 20th century, cinema provides an interesting focal point for contrasting views about the nature and consequences of digital delivery technologies. The place of cinema in the context of contemporary

³⁶ On the rich subject of mobile screen media and the particular case of the iPhone see, for example, Hjorth, Richardson, and Burgess (2012); and Snickars and Vonderau (2012).

audiovisual culture has, accordingly, become the source of great anxiety and of much debate and analysis. On the one hand, cinema was famously pronounced dead, either on ontological grounds (the digital vs. indexical debate), or on sociological ones (portable screen devices and online databases and streaming services would relocate the experience of cinema outside the movie theatre)³⁷. The debate around the Hollywood blockbuster and CGI-imagery provided a fertile terrain for the on-going negative assessment of the impact of new delivery technologies on cinema. After television, the computer and the Internet became the cumulative culprits of the disruption of causality in favour of spectacular CGI-effects and non-linear narratives, or the presence of interactive and video game-like “logics” in the organization of the cinematic image. Unified action and the spectator’s continuous concentration seemed to give way to fragmented segments and short attention span. In only a few cases, have digital technologies been welcomed for opening up opportunities for understanding (and explaining) the more complex and ambiguous aspects of the cinematic form, such as, for example, the co-existence of narrative and spectacle³⁸.

On the other hand, the digital contaminations of cinema have been interpreted as a positive and cherished development through which cinema would free itself from the confines of the movie theatre and the formal constraints imposed by the configuration of that apparatus. Partly as a response to the “dissolution of meaning” argument in the blockbuster debate, Jenkins (2006) advanced the *transmedia storytelling* paradigm to suggest that some contemporary audiovisual texts have the ability to spread across different delivery devices. The concept of transmedia storytelling refers to texts that display this ability, and suggests that the same is caused by digital modes of circulation and reception (in particular, from the social media of Web 2.0), as much as any pre-existing intention to create audiovisual texts that will aptly spread across an already predetermined number of delivery technologies (see also Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013).

³⁷ See Casetti and Sampietro (2012); Pedullà (2012); and Wyatt (1994).

³⁸ See King (2000; 2002); Maltby (2003); Elsaesser and Buckland (2002); Ndalians (2004); and Darley (2000).

The terms of the debate on cinema offer a compelling focal point for a more general discussion about these contrasting evaluations of the social and cultural practices associated with digital delivery technologies. They can be summed up around two central issues: *textuality* and *spectatorship*. Digital delivery technologies changed existing textual and spectatorial practices and created new ones whereby the formal operations of fragmentation, repetition and recombination have gained an unprecedented centrality. This transformation generated conflicting interpretations. First, in relation to textuality, an important interpretative tradition mobilizes digital delivery technologies to reiterate the influential jamesonian dictat about the demise of meaning in contemporary audiovisual culture, described as a depthless semiotic environment where signifiers float around detached from what they signify. The meaning of audiovisual texts is reduced to a pure play of surfaces, thus encouraging their swift, unobtrusive consumption (Jameson 1990; 1998). These interpretations see digital technologies as a continuation of the postmodernist challenge to the notions of unified texts and subjects in favour of the festive celebration of their always-already constructed, re-combined, and fragmented forms of production, circulation, and reception. Such is the case, among many others, of Vivan Sobchack (1994), who builds directly upon Jameson to postulate an “electronic mode of representation”, all surface and uninhabitable, characterized by the *topoi* of “representation in itself,” the transformation of referentiality into textuality, as well as the erosion of “the temporal cohesion of history and narrative” (1994, 101). Similarly, Andrew Darley (2000) posits that digital imaging and editing techniques played a key role in the advancement of a jamesonian “culture of depthlessness,” whether transforming older cultural forms —like the music video, mainstream cinema, TV advertising—, or informing new ones —like computer games and special venue attractions (2000, 76). Lev Manovich (2002), furthermore, suggests, now borrowing from Lyotard, that in the wake of the breakdown of Enlightenment grand narratives, the database is the most adequate “symbolic form of the computer age” (2002, 219), most aptly fitted to describe a world that now presents itself as “an endless and unstructured collection of images, texts, and other data records” (2002, 219).

On the other hand, instead of heralding the erosion of representation and meaning, the social and cultural affordances of digital delivery technologies have also been understood to offer an important epistemological opportunity. As a previously unified text is fragmented, either during its production or circulation, or even as a precondition to its reception, the arbitrariness of the sign, the process of representation itself, and the role of language in subject formation all achieve visibility (Poster 1995; 2006). From this perspective, digital delivery technologies are *textuality-producing machines* that increase reflexivity and bring an epistemological potential into play in each encounter with contemporary, digitally mediated audiovisual texts. As opposed to the facilitation of consumption, this perspective is habitually aligned with critical and emancipatory interpretations of postmodernist culture (Kaplan 1988; Hutcheon 2002). However, these same authors may also see contemporary delivery technologies as nothing more than a *digital declination* of postmodernist affirmative culture. In these instances, the contradiction is not always acknowledged, let alone explained. Textuality is, in these cases, understood either as an undesired strategy imposed on the spectator, one that encourages further consumption of audiovisual texts, or as a tactic sought and welcomed by viewers, that illuminates how the text in front of them, as well as meaning itself, are formed.

There are similarly contrasting analyses of digitally mediated forms of spectatorship. On the one hand, the practices of reception of Web 2.0 imply agency, encapsulated in the concept of *participatory culture*, or in that of *interactivity*, and embodied, for example, in the figure of the *produser* (Bruns 2008). Digital spectatorship could then be a *factory of subject formation*, allowing the same individual to engage in multiple configurations of subjectivity. The debates around the variable spectator positions generated by music video provided an important precedent for this discussion (Kaplan 1987). Many discourses about contemporary digital culture, taking the music video as a paradigmatic example, further elaborated on the experiences of “playful agency” (Darley 2000, 173) and “knowing fascination” (2000, 112) that digitally constructed and mediated audiovisual texts offer their spectators. From this perspective, in short, subject formation is, thanks to digital culture, always a

project and a *process*. It shatters and decentres claims to a unified subjectivity, therefore empowering previously repressed gender, sexual, religious, and ethnic identities to come to the fore.

On the other hand, the fleeting, provisional, and transitional subjectivities encouraged by digital spectatorship have also been interpreted as a strategy that expedites the a-critical, alienated consumption of digitally mediated audiovisual texts (Fuchs 2014; Kazeroun 2014). By encouraging active, participatory modes of spectatorship, Jenkins' model of "convergence culture" must also be seen as something that transfers to consumers an important share of the labour and the value-making processes required by the economy of social media. As its critics have shown (Schäfer 2008), the concept of participatory culture is not a by-product, or an unforeseen opportunity to vent user creativity and consolidate new communities and identities; it is the absolute core of the business model of Web 2.0. Here, labour and value are impossible without user participation. Thus, convergence culture cannot be said to *merge* the traditional roles of consumers and producers; rather, it quite literally *swaps* those roles. An example at hand is YouTube's business model, where the user's viewing history produces metadata that are constitutive of that database's mode of organizing and presenting information (see Jean Burgess and Joshua Green (2009) and Karin Van Es (2010)). In this way, variable spectator positions and the activity of digital spectatorship are drained of their emancipatory potential to become further alienating tools in a form of what we might call "ludic capitalism" (Galloway 2012). The fact that the above-mentioned assessments of textuality and spectatorship can be reversed betrays the presence of a binary perspective at work. When some scholars interpret the consequences of the textual and spectatorial practices introduced by digital delivery technologies, they choose one or the other position: critical reflexivity *or* incremental consumption; emancipatory subject formation and variable identities *or* disguised forms of labour and exploitation. And yet so much evidence points to the simultaneity, even the interdependency, of both perspectives. A reconciliatory angle might be rhetorically appealing, but what I would like to suggest, instead, is that digital delivery technologies allow less the *compromise* of two different sets of interpretations, but rather the understanding of the *ambiguous* nature of all

digitally mediated texts and spectator positions; or, in other words, the constitutive *interdependency* of the contradictory, competing forces in digitally mediated forms of textuality and subject formation.

I believe it is worth underlining the need to focus on the acts of digital mediation themselves and on how these acts can, beyond the production of textuality or variable subject formations, *teach* the spectator something not only about the *processes of formation of texts and subjectivity* themselves, but also about the *interdependency of critical and consumerist stances* that is intrinsic to those same processes. But is this really something new? Does an act of mediation that draws attention to itself, as much as beyond it, and that in doing so teaches the spectator something about the conditions of possibility and the role of both text and spectator in the world and in relation to each other, not echo traditional claims about modernism?

2.1.2. Back to modernism

The modernist aesthetic is traditionally associated with an enquiry into the formal essence of a medium, and, furthermore, claims for reflexivity as the touchstone of the mediation process. By favouring fragmentation, repetition and recombination, modernist works draw attention to the very process of representation and, in this way, to the existing relation between the world and the subject. Modernism was, if there ever was one, the perfect factory of textuality and subjectivity. This perspective played an important role in art historical theory thanks to the influential work of Clement Greenberg (1989). In the context of film, montage theory, understood as a self-reflexive investigation of the cinematic medium's supposed "essence," has occupied a central place since the theoretical and artistic work of S.M. Eisenstein in particular, even reaching contemporary audiovisual culture. It was this interpretation, for example, that led Alexander Galloway (2012, 3) to describe Manovich's analysis of new media as "modernist," in the sense that such analysis strived to assign the distinctive "essence" of new media to the reflexive affordances of digital technologies (even if only to conclude that such affordances were not that new after all).

This is not, however, the only perspective on modernism, and one might argue it is no longer the predominant one³⁹. A different interpretation shifts the essentialist investigation of the distinguishing qualities of a given medium to the question of how mediation works, and attributes equal importance to mimetic representation alongside reflexivity. Writing about the influence of montage on literary modernism, David Trotter (2007) suggests that the appeal of reflexivity was not the only motivation for modernist writers who drew inspiration from film. Apart from the possibility of changing the spatial-temporal configuration of the world, afforded by montage, these writers also welcomed the “will-to-automatism” that cinema, a mechanical recording medium, could offer. As this example shows, a closer look at the modernist formal operations of fragmentation, repetition and recombination finds that they always exist in parallel with a drive toward mimetic forms of representation (in this case anchored in the nature of cinema as a recording medium). In this interpretation of modernism, the formal qualities and the technological characteristics of the medium show the mediation process to be marked by two competing, but interdependent forces: a medium strives to be entirely transparent (mimetic and iconic), *and* entirely opaque (reflexive). It is the simultaneous presence of these forces that makes the *artist* and the *spectator* alike aware of the process of mediation itself. The co-existence of mimetic representation and reflexivity establishes a homology between the formal operations present during the production *and* the reception of an audiovisual text. This homology allows the spectator to retrace and indeed to re-experience the creative moment as a moment marked by the provisional resolution of the tensions between representation and reflexivity. However, this discovery goes past a curious glimpse inside the artist’s mind and his “creative process,” as it goes well beyond an understanding of how a particular text was formed. Apart from this, the spectator’s confrontation with the tensions created by the co-existence of mimetic representation and reflexivity in a specific work allow him to understand all texts and all subject formation as *processes*, and not as *a priori* conditions of their experience. In other words, the co-existence of these two forces has the potential to allow the spectator to generalize from any single

³⁹ See Crow (1983) and Huyssen (1986).

experience the formulation of a principle that carries rich epistemological lessons.

The spectator's awareness of the homology between the formal operations involved in watching *and* producing a text therefore transforms every viewing experience into an opportunity to learn about the conditions of possibility of that viewing experience as well. In other words, modernist forms of mediation, understood as the self-conscious experience of mimetic representation and reflexivity, of transparency and opacity, of presence and absence of both the medium and the spectator, carry with them a constitutive, and as it were inevitable, *epistemological potential*.

Remediation and interface effects

The modernist interpretation of the mediation act as constituted by the two competing drives of mimetic representation and reflexivity can now be found in many debates about mediation in the context of contemporary audiovisual culture. We could even ask whether the shift in the definition of modernism we described above might not have been fuelled by this particular audiovisual cultural context, and the questions raised by digital delivery technologies in relation to previous mediation theories. What is certain is that the recent use of the concepts of *dispositif*, *remediation*, and *interface* suggests more complex interpretations of the act of mediation in contemporary digital audiovisual culture, which seem to more or less explicitly draw on this version of modernism.

Often considered the epitome of contemporary audiovisual culture, YouTube has been described as a “modular dispositif” (Van Es 2010, 44ff.) that offers varying modes of address and hence different spectator positions — especially when compared to the sedentary and (considerably more) rigid spectatorship experiences of cinema and television. Van Es' conclusions about YouTube can be extended to audiovisual culture as a whole. Like the videos of YouTube, many other contemporary audiovisual texts can be accessed from different screen types and on various locations, creating a form of “elastic

agency” (2010, 11–12) characterised by the fact that spectators are able to choose, to an important degree, how and where they will engage with the audiovisual text and, consequentially, which spectator position they will occupy. This characterisation of YouTube embodies the epistemological potential of modernist mediation because to engage “elastically” and “modularly” with these texts is, necessarily, to offer the chance to learn something about the processes of textual and subject formation as well.

The concept of *remediation*, on the other hand, signals a much more explicit reference to the modernist association of representation and reflexivity. However, as a concept, it is far from consensual. Galloway, for example, has suggested that remediation is a notion “so full of wholes” (2012, 20) that we would do better to discard it entirely. The standard account of Bolter and Grusin’s (2000) concept reads it as a “layer model of media” that, not unlike McLuhan, describes media as essentially “nothing but formal containers housing other pieces of media” (Galloway 2012, 31). While this description of remediation’s limited contribution to the understanding of media change is plausible, it nevertheless fails to take into account Bolter and Grusin’s description of how the process of mediation itself works. According to their argument, in every act of mediation there is a permanent oscillation between the logic of *immediacy* and of *hypermediacy* (Bolter and Grusin 2000, 24ff.). The logic of transparent immediacy (that is, of mimetic representation) dictates the erasure of the medium and of representation as something at a distance from the referent. It strives to abolish the gap between the subject and the world through the concealment of both the representational process and the creator of the representation. Hypermediacy, on the other hand, acknowledges and brings into visibility the act of representation and the medium itself. In a representation marked by immediacy the viewer engages with a single and unified visual space, whereas in hypermediated representations the viewer is confronted with a fragmented and multiple visual space. While the first type of representation, taking up the tradition of linear perspective, might still be conceived as offering itself as a “window” to the world, the latter is itself “windowed,” accumulating simultaneous representations and/or other media as well—a metaphor that is intended to draw as much on the genealogy of previous modes of representation

(the Albertian window), as on the contemporary graphic user interfaces that use “windows” as a representational strategy in computer design (Friedberg 2006).

An important reason that explains why immediacy and hypermediacy can co-exist is that both can provide the viewer with an experience of authenticity. Bolter and Grusin argue this point by clarifying that the terms immediacy and hypermediacy have an *epistemological*, as well as a *psychological* sense (2000, 70–1). The first refers to the presence or absence of mediation, and to the acknowledgement of the transparency or opacity of mediation. The latter refers to the object of the viewer’s experience: in the case of immediacy, it is the feeling that mediation has been removed and that what is experienced is the reality of represented thing itself; in hypermediacy, it is the experience of the medium itself which is felt as the experience of the real. In both experiences, the viewer feels a sense of authenticity, which, combining the logics of immediacy and hypermediacy, allows the viewer to find forms of gratification in both.

In spite of this, the concept of remediation does not clarify exactly *how* immediacy and hypermediacy interact. Addressing this issue, and writing specifically about the context of digital technologies and the computer, Galloway turned to the *interface* to analyse the conceptual site where immediacy and hypermediacy meet and negotiate their relative identity and function. The interface is a threshold that achieves *more* the *less* it does (Galloway 2012, 25). In other words, the interface must work within the paradoxical limits of a situation in which, the more efficient and operable it is, the less visible and more inoperable it becomes. As Bolter and Grusin had already hinted when they argued that incremental “immediacy leads to hypermediacy” (2000, 19) the reverse situation is equally true and paradoxical. The digital interface, according to Galloway, is the conceptual and technical place where this paradox is negotiated. It is for this reason that he suggests that the interface is not an object, but an “effect,” that is, the result of that negotiation. The interface can then be seen as a “fertile nexus” (Galloway 2012, 33) where one thing starts becoming the other, a continuous “process of translation” (*ibidem*) where the relative positions of what is exterior and interior to the medium are determined. These tensions find an expression, on the aesthetic level, that determines what in a given text points to a mimetic representation of the outside world (what

generates transparent immediacy), and what instead points to the medium (what generates opaque hypermediacy). This is the *intraface*, an “interface internal to the interface” (Galloway 2012, 40) that works as a zone of indecision between the formal elements of the text: edge and centre, its diegetic and non-diegetic elements, the balance between verbal and non-verbal communication. The interface therefore supplements the concept of remediation as a way to think the tension of the double logic of immediacy and hypermediacy, mimetic representation and reflexivity, *inside* the medium, *both from a technological and from an aesthetic point of view*. As Galloway admits, the *intraface* involves formal techniques not unlike those employed by modernist texts. Accordingly, the epistemological potential of modernism is revived in digitally mediated audiovisual texts because, here too, the “stress [...] is that one must always think about the image as a process, rather than as a set of discrete, immutable items.” (Galloway 2012, 37)

The split-screen and the “desktop cinema” are two formal strategies widely used by the digital audiovisual essay that are especially illustrative of the double logic of remediation (both shall be the subject of detailed analyses in chapter 3). The split-screen appropriates, fragments and recombines shots from two or more different films inside the same frame with the purpose of establishing a comparison, arguing a thematic relation or a formal similarity. It simultaneously presents the viewer with the semiotic content of the compared films —that is, a form of mimetic representation of the world— with the ostensive, reflexive presentation of the device that makes that comparison possible. Although the split-screen has become a recurrent formal strategy in contemporary audiovisual texts, it nevertheless evokes an ‘unnatural’ viewing experience not only because of its multiplication of shots inside the frame, but also because it obviously brings into spatial and therefore intellectual proximity shots that belong to different films. In other words, it combines immediacy with hypermediacy, attention to iconic content with reflexive attention to the device through which that content is brought to the attention of the viewer in the first place.

The “desktop cinema” (Lee 2014b) provides an even more elaborate, and probably more literal, example of the double logic of remediation at work in the

digital audiovisual essay. Here, the desktop of the computer of the digital essayist is recorded and the viewer watches as the author uses his editing software to assemble the essay itself, which is then shown in full frame or co-existing with the opened windows of other applications such as Internet browsers, word processors, and multimedia file players. In a “desktop cinema” essay, the viewer watches “over the shoulder” of the essayist’s computer as he uses various software applications to present, combine, and comment on different audiovisual texts. Here, the double logic of remediation is quite literal, as the computer interface is ostensibly included in the frame and thus becomes identified as the device that makes possible the mimetic representation of the individual films that are the object of the essay’s analysis. In this way, the double logic of remediation makes the spectator aware that all iconic content is as important in itself as its mode of presentation, and specifically that the digital audiovisual essay itself results from an ostensive and visible act of technological mediation.

The recurrence of the modernist double logic of remediation in contemporary audiovisual culture begs the issue of periodization. What is the exact nature of this recurrence? Does it signal a different, new period of media change or, on the contrary, does it carry the unlikely implication that nothing really changed after modernism? And perhaps more decisively, has this digital iteration of the double logic of remediation affected modernism’s epistemological potential?

Internalization

The reason why the concept of remediation provides an inadequate model of media change is that it posits its historical drive —the double logic of immediacy and hypermediacy— in a fundamentally binary and successive way. According to Bolter and Grusin, since a medium cannot exist (or be perceived as such) in isolation from other media, its existence is always subjected to the double logic of remediation and its varying degrees of immediacy and hypermediacy. In this way, the oscillation between immediacy and hypermediacy dictates a cyclical view of media change in which newness is associated with the promise of

immediacy, a promise that will inevitably be frustrated by hypermediacy, at which point the process starts again and newness is located elsewhere, in another remediation of previously existing media.

Bolter and Grusin also argue, not without some contradiction, that some historical moments can be characterized by the predominance of *either* immediacy or hypermediacy. In fact, they suggest that since the Renaissance, media such as perspective painting, and later photography, film, and television, as well as digital media today, were and are marked by the double logic of remediation. At the same time, they maintain that “it was not until modernism that the cultural dominance of the paradigm of transparency was effectively challenged,” (2000, 38) a situation that would find its climax at the end of the 20th century, when the contradictory imperatives of immediacy and hypermediacy seem equally manifest thanks to digital new media (2000, 5). Although the argument is ambiguous, implicitly their claim that immediacy has been predominant until modernism, and that after modernism hypermediacy became dominant instead, suggests that both the logics of immediacy and of hypermediacy have been acknowledged in varying degrees throughout their history. In this way, the importance given to hypermediacy and reflexivity in the context of modernism is to be understood as merely the downplaying of the logic of immediacy, which was also at work there. Bolter and Grusin’s following statement becomes clearer when seen in this light:

“At the end of the twentieth century, we are in a position to *understand* hypermediacy as immediacy’s opposite number, an alter ego that has never been suppressed fully or for long periods of time.” (Bolter and Grusin 2000, 34)

Bolter and Grusin argue that digital new media such as the World Wide Web are what enable the contemporary *understanding* of the double logic of remediation. But just *why* and *how* exactly do digital media—or more accurately, digital delivery technologies and their corresponding accompanying social and cultural practices— provide a better understanding of the double logic of remediation? As Galloway’s argument about the digital interface suggests, the double logic of remediation has become more visible and perhaps more

graspable in everyday engagements with audiovisual texts. From my perspective, if there is a change in the current historical moment of digitally mediated audiovisual culture, it should be characterized by the incremental acknowledgement of the interdependency that characterizes mediation, *and* by the fact that remediation has since become *constitutive* of how audiovisual texts are produced, distributed and received. In this way, digitally mediated audiovisual culture would both *update* and *enhance* the formal operations typical of modernism. Incorporated in every encounter with contemporary audiovisual texts, the formal operations of modernism —fragmentation, repetition, and recombination— become routine technical processes; they are no longer effects of, or obstacles to the viewing experience, nor the exclusive expertise of the producer and distributor of the audiovisual text, but have instead become inherent to the production, circulation and reception of audiovisual texts by every spectator.

An illustrative example of the internalization of the double logic of remediation in the dispositifs of contemporary digitally mediated culture can be found in the DualShock 4, the most recent PlayStation controller (Sony Computer Entertainment 2013). It was introduced with the PlayStation 4 in November 2013. Like its predecessors, the DualShock 4 takes its name from the ability to vibrate in the hands of the player to denote the physical interactions of the game character with its environment. In spite of all these new features, one thing remains unchanged. The controller's analog right and left sticks have maintained their functions: the left stick controls the game character's movements; the right stick controls the changes in perspective on the game environment. These functions have become a convention in most video games and are also present in game controllers from other manufacturers (i.e., Microsoft's Xbox). The movement control stick dates back to the controller's first version in 1997, and is in fact a function as old as video gaming itself. The right stick control, however, is more interesting. This feature is often referred to as to "look around" but also as "camera movement" or "camera pov". It can include or exclude the body or part of the body of the game character, therefore becoming as much a change in the character's point of view, as in the user's perspective on the game. It can assume the function of a subjective shot, but it can belong either to the character or to

the user. In any case, this change in perspective is always chosen by the player and it can be completely severed from any spatial-motor coherence with the character's movement. You do not have to watch where you are going, but can look around freely for as long as you want. By combining control over the character's movement with the control over what the character sees and how he is shown, the player accumulates a number of roles: she is not only a player, but also a filmmaker or sorts, not to mention the first spectator of her own cinematic production. The possibility to share a video of one's own gameplay, as well as the possibility to broadcast it live to other PlayStation users, only highlights the importance of aptly organising — and even of *rehearsing*— not only one's performance, but how that performance is recorded.

In this way, the contemporary videogame experience combines two very different characteristics. On the one hand, it seems to enhance a more immersive game experience, in which the player is literally inscribed in the game environment, as much as that environment joins the user in his living room, its sounds, images and vibrations directly resonating in his hands, eyes, and ears⁴⁰. On the other hand, the player is now even more aware of the controller's mediation than ever, because he can control not only how its game character moves around, but also how this movement is portrayed. The possibility to share the cinematic arrangement of one's gameplay underlines the importance to exert control not only over the character's movements and actions, but also over the framing decisions that better depict those movements and actions.

⁴⁰ The PlayStation 4 can be connected to a new camera with twin lenses that equips the console with the ability to recognize depth of space, and special features such as user facial recognition login. More to the point, through this camera the PS4 allows the user to have her body image cropped and pasted into a game environment where she can seamlessly co-exist and interact with animated characters. This feature is demonstrated in the Playroom application, which is built-in in all PS4s.

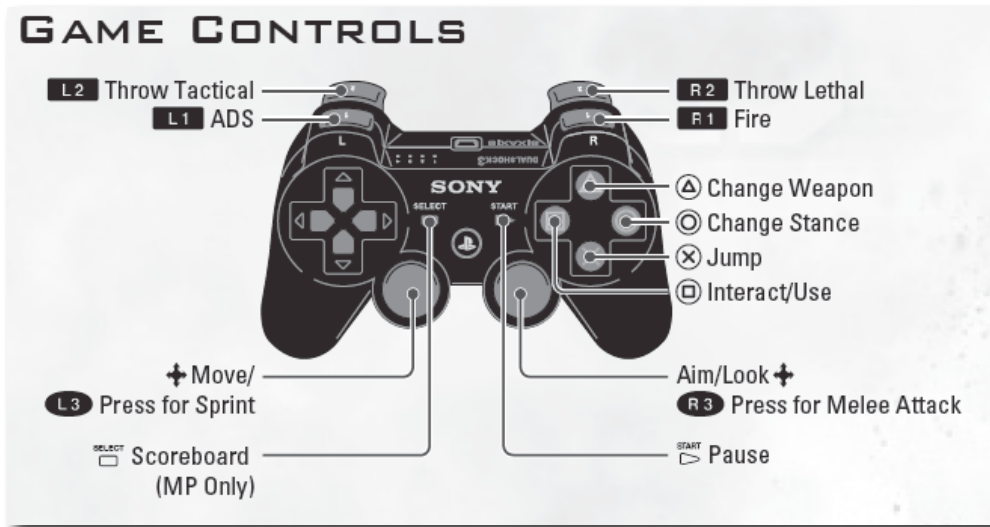


Figure 9: *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* Dualshock3 game controls.

The DualShock is an example among many that showcases the *internalization* of the double logic of remediation that characterises contemporary audiovisual culture. Its combination of hypermediacy and immediacy is not just metaphorical. On the contrary, the DualShock literally places in the hands of the game player not just the awareness of remediation, but also its *experience*. In the context of digitally mediated audiovisual culture, the pleasures of transparent, immersive mimetic representation, and the playful engagement with an opaque game controller are not incompatible. They are complementary, and the awareness of their complementary is not a posthumous theoretical conclusion—it is both the precondition and the consequence of their ordinary, everyday experience.

In other words, the double logic of remediation has been *internalized* by the dispositifs of digital visual culture. Each time we engage with its texts, we not only *understand*—as Bolter and Grusin put it—, but also necessarily *experience and put to practice* the complementary relation between hypermediacy and immediacy.

The digital audiovisual essay and internalized remediation

The *internalization* of the double logic of remediation by digital technologies has thus placed a process of *practical* and *material* epistemological discovery at the centre of contemporary spectatorship. Digital spectatorship requires an active,

self-conscious spectator that cannot engage with digitally mediated audiovisual texts without simultaneously learning about the conditions of existence of those texts and about the process of spectatorship itself. To engage with contemporary audiovisual texts it is necessary to understand how a whole might divide itself into smaller parts, to compare those parts among themselves and with the whole they were severed from—if only to challenge the form or the very existence of that whole—, looking for patterns of difference and similarity, becoming aware of different media contexts and spectatorship situations, and to test one's discoveries before the judgement of one's peers.⁴¹ In short, it is necessary to become engaged in *collaborative analytical operations*, which means that in order for consumers to become producers, as postulated by participatory culture, they must first become *textual analysts*.

The relevance of the digital audiovisual essay as an exemplary text of digitally mediated audiovisual culture resides in the fact that it is both shaped by the internalization of the double logic of remediation and that it has the ability to illuminate this very process. Many of the audiovisual essays that will be discussed in this dissertation (chapter 3) can be described as investigations of their authors' spectatorial experiences. These essays are, in a very literal sense, second hand viewing experiences that their authors' have reconstructed and shared publicly. This is presumably why the digital audiovisual essay has appealed to a variety of practitioners, from casual fans to film critics and film scholars, all of which already used to value, analyse and share their spectatorial experiences (a variety that also accounts, as we shall see, for the form's wide methodological spectrum and its combination of creative and analytical stances). Although a limited cultural practice, digital audiovisual essays are nevertheless texts with which a great number of spectators can relate to. This happens not only because the object of these essays are individual and personal viewing experiences, but also—and perhaps more decisively— because they are shared across the Internet and viewed in personal computers, that is to say, in viewing conditions that bring closer the essayist and his audience because those

⁴¹ And, more importantly from a political point of view, presuming that those are indeed one's peers; that is, presuming the equality between us and those one shares our ideas with as a *precondition* and not a result, of intellectual exchange.

conditions are common to the production, the circulation and the reception of contemporary audiovisual texts. In other words, audiovisual essayists investigate the digitally mediated audiovisual culture that shaped their viewing experiences, and which also informs the viewing situations of everyday, casual spectatorship.

The digital audiovisual essay re-enacts those everyday viewing experiences by making use of exactly the same digital affordances of digital delivery technologies —such as non-linear viewing and editing tools and omnipresent graphical user interfaces— that made those viewing experiences possible in the first place. Re-enacting the fragmentation and recombination of previously existing texts and a mode of presentation that combines mimetic representation and the foregrounding of the mediating technological interface, the digital audiovisual essay replicates the formal operations that are inscribed in each digitally mediated viewing situation, thus revealing the epistemological potential of those same (digitally mediated) situations —namely, the understanding that all audiovisual texts are materially and semiotically *constructed* textual and subject formations.

This is not to argue that all spectators will become as conscious of the epistemological potential of remediation such as it has become constitutive of so many viewing situations today. The digital audiovisual essayists still, and probably will always, represent a limited number of self-conscious spectators that have acted upon those epistemological discoveries to create new audiovisual texts. In this light, the audiovisual essay is a self-conscious exploration of digitally mediated audiovisual culture that builds from the rich epistemological potential that has become internalized by digital delivery technologies —and regardless of the fact that the majority of spectators is not as conscious and not as inclined to act upon that same epistemological potential.

The internalization of this un-acted upon epistemological potential of the double logic of remediation must lead us to question its function. Because it is inscribed in the digital delivery technologies that mediate those texts, these epistemological discoveries are not so much *chosen*, as they are *imposed* upon the spectators. In the same way, the epistemological activity that now complements the reception of audiovisual texts is as much a *consequence* as an

inevitable *condition* to access contemporary audiovisual culture. This is not to say that the epistemological potential inscribed in digital delivery technologies is an unwelcomed, taxing activity for the spectator. On the contrary, the awareness of the double logic of remediation, and consequentially of the instability of texts and subjectivity is a rather playful activity that rewards the spectator with unprecedented and intense, sensuous and intellectual pleasures. At the same time, it is important to think about this displacement of the production of meaning onto the spectator in the context of the participatory model of labour and value-making processes that characterizes the economy of Web 2.0. In a very significant way, the perceptual and interpretative gratifications inherent to the engagements with contemporary audiovisual texts are not *unintended consequences* of this type of reception of audiovisual texts, but the *necessary conditions* of a mode of production whose very functioning and surplus strategies depend on the labour of its users.

The consequences of the process of internalization of the double logic of remediation must then be the object of a careful, balanced analysis. The issue is not limited to the dangers of reducing critical work to the “new methodologies of scanning, playing, sampling, parsing, and recombining” that equate the critic with “a sort of remix artist, a disc jockey of the mind” (Galloway 2012, 29). It is no longer the critic, but the everyday casual spectator who is now involved with these epistemological activities, whose exact function must be ascertained. Is this a democratic expansion of the epistemological potentials of modernism? Or are these pseudo-critical activities intended to intensify the consumerist rhythms of contemporary audiovisual texts? Or still, as will be suggested in the following section, can the internalization of remediation simply be the most recent expression of the dialectical relation between critique and consumerism that characterises capitalist mass culture?

2.1.3. Beyond modernism? The ideological functions of remediation

To say that digitally mediated culture has internalized modernism’s double logic of remediation, its foregrounding of an ambiguous textuality and spectatorship,

suggests two things. First, it suggests that the modernist epistemological potential that was once limited to specific cinematic and artistic practices now seems to pervade most encounters with audiovisual culture. Willingly or not, all viewers that engage with digitally mediated texts are also engaging with the key formal operations of modernism, and are thus updating the epistemological potentials of those same formal operations. This implies not only a playful engagement with fragmented audiovisual texts, but also a playful engagement with the possibility of learning about the rudiments of how an audiovisual text is constituted and communicates its meaning to a spectator. Secondly, the current pervasiveness of modernism's epistemological potential does not seem to be accompanied by an exponential increase in visual literacy. More than anything else, the re-combinatory practices that digitally mediated culture incorporates in its modes of production, circulation and reception of audiovisual texts seems to reiterate an understanding of contemporary audiovisual culture as something always already fragmented or something that is always about to become fragmented (see above, section 2.1.1.).

It is necessary to ask, then, what is the ideological role of contemporary audiovisual culture's internalization of the epistemological potential of modernism? Will it allow viewers to better understand the audiovisual texts they engage with, as well as those texts' place within the economy of mass produced moving images? Or has that epistemological potential been domesticated as merely a way to extend capitalism's grip on consumers, cynically misrepresenting remixing as criticism, and criticism as emancipation?

A first answer must take into account the role of digital culture's epistemological potential and its ability to criticize, as much as extend, the consumerism of mass produced and mass circulated audiovisual texts. To do this, it is necessary to understand how modernism's ambiguous relation to mass culture has been internalized and enhanced, and whether or not contemporary digitally mediated culture can be presented as having surpassed both modernism and postmodernism in this process.

If remediation theory allows for a renewed understanding of modernism, it also transforms it into an unending process. Just as there is no end to the interplay of immediacy and hypermediacy that characterises remediation, there

should be no end to the double logic that is forever at work in modernism's relation with mass culture. Thomas Crow makes this point when he argues, contrary to Clement Greenberg's view of modernism and popular culture as opposites, the existence of a cycle of endless interdependency between the two. In this way, Crow suggests, modernism's oppositional claims are founded upon a "repeated return to mass-cultural material" (1983, 244) that challenges hegemonic forms of predominant culture by incorporating what is outside "legitimate" artistic practice. The modernist appropriation of mass culture will, in turn, be appropriated by mass culture, thus making available to more consumers what had previously enjoyed a marginal, subcultural status. Once this re-integration of modernist texts into mass culture is complete, the process can begin anew in other subcultural fringes (created by further modernist appropriations), thus proving Crow's affirmation about the "overwhelming recuperative inertia" of culture under developed capitalism (1983, 256). Because this cycle is, Crow warns, always one-directional —"appropriation of oppositional practices upward, the return of evacuated cultural goods downward" (1983, 255)—, modernist negation becomes, "paradoxically, an instrument of cultural domination." (1983, 255)⁴² In this way, and although Crow considers this process as productive for affirmative culture, as for the expression of a critical consciousness (in the moment of negation of modernist appropriation), he also sees at work in the complete cycle a "deeper, more systematic rationale (...) which ends in the domestication of every modernist movement." (1983, 251)

Discussions about the concept of postmodernism have focussed primarily and precisely on how this cycle might be broken and its consequences. Postmodernism has been understood to veer, on the one hand, towards an affirmative, domesticated culture, one that dovetails with the hegemonic social structures and forms of political conservatism; or, on the other hand, towards a critical and even emancipatory cultural production, one that is able to challenge high/low culture distinctions and, more importantly, to question the role of culture as a legitimatising tool of hegemonic social groups and institutions.

⁴² Crow goes as far as describing avant-garde appropriations from mass culture as "a kind of research and development arm of the culture industry." (1983, 251)

Andreas Huyssen has offered one of the best interpretations of the complex relation between modernism and postmodernism, aptly avoiding both the idea of an unending, cyclical, modernism, and the simplistic notion of a complete break with it. He starts by framing postmodernism in relational terms to modernism (1986, 183). It was not modernism *per se*, but a specific and narrow *interpretation* of it that postmodernism rendered obsolete (1986, 218). Technology was not, in Huyssen's view —and from the vantage point of his historical moment— the reason for “the great divide that separated high modernism from mass culture and that was codified in the various classical accounts of modernism” (1986, 196–7). He attributes this shift rather to the changing historical conditions that had aligned modernism with the project of modernity and unending modernization during the early Cold War period. In the 1970s, Huyssen argues, the historical limits of modernism, modernization and modernity had become clear and had liberated art from “pursuing some telos of abstraction, non-representation, and sublimity,” (1986, 217) while at the same time rescued from the sombre alternative of lapsing “into irrationality or into apocalyptic frenzy.” (ibidem) The crisis sparked off by postmodernism in the 1970s is therefore, not *another* crisis of modernism, but a crisis of the *culture of modernism* of an entirely new type. First and foremost, postmodernism changed the view of modernism as a teleological unfolding of crisis and exclusion to a tale of “contradictions and contingencies” marked by “tensions and internal resistances to its own ‘forward’ movement.” (1986, 217)

Postmodernism, therefore, harbours the “productive contradictions” (1986, 200) of modernist culture, namely its ambiguous relations to modernization and mass culture, heightening them and bringing them into focus not only in the arts, but also in criticism. By this, Huyssen is referring to poststructuralist-oriented criticism. This last point is crucial because, to Huyssen, the “migration” of the “creative powers” —and I would add of the *epistemological potential*— of modernism from art to poststructuralism is what liberated art from the historical contingencies that attached it to the blind embodiment of the project of modernity. Poststructuralism both justified and encouraged a modernism “of playful transgression, of an unlimited weaving of textuality, a modernism all confident in its rejection of representation and

reality, in its denial of the subject, of history, and of the subject of history" (1986, 209). Refusing the traditional view of poststructuralism as the critical iteration of postmodernism, Huyssen argues that poststructuralism should be interpreted instead as a *theory of modernism* that elects once more "realism and representation, mass culture and standardization, grammar, communication, and the presumably all-powerful homogenizing pressures of the modern State" (1986, 209) as its choice enemies; and that reproduces modernism's critique of authorship and subjectivity (1986, 212). But in Huyssen's view, post-structuralism's most important challenge is not, however, the re-presentation, as a novelty, of a critical stance that modernism already presupposed, but rather the renewal of the duplication

"on the level of aesthetics and theory [of] what capitalism as a system of exchange relations produces tendentially in everyday life: the denial of subjectivity in the very process of its construction. Post-structuralism thus attacks the appearance of capitalist culture —individualism writ large— but misses its essence; like modernism, it is always also in synch with rather than opposed to the real processes of modernization." (Huyssen 1986, 213)

However, as a theoretical "revenant" of modernism, poststructuralism does recognize this dilemma and provides, in a characteristic postmodern move, a "retrospective reading" of modernism "which, in some cases, is fully aware of modernism's limitations and failed political ambitions," Huyssen adds (1986, 209). Just as the epistemological potential of modernism *migrated* into (poststructuralist) theory, I would argue that in digitally mediated culture this potential —along with the acknowledgement of all the tensions that accompany it— *has migrated from theory to the dispositif* that enables the production, circulation and reception of contemporary audiovisual cultural forms. This dispositif inherits the "productive contradictions" of modernism's relation to mass culture and modernization, as well as postmodernism's self-consciousness about the tensions involved in that relation. As I have been arguing, the migration of those tensions to the dispositif renders their acknowledgement by the spectator inevitable and constitutive of every viewing experience —both as a source of epistemological engagement that involves important forms of pleasure,

and as a form of extending not only the ideology of consumer culture, but capitalism's material grip, to individual subjects.

What is at stake in digital culture's relation to mass-produced and circulated audiovisual texts could hardly be defined, then, as the *surpassing* of modernism. It is, rather, the inscription of digital culture's epistemological operations in an interpretative tradition of modernism that acknowledges both the reflexive and the iconic nature of audiovisual texts and the pleasures associated with the conscious manipulation of all the intermediate degrees that separate full opacity from complete transparency, and pseudo-participation from full-blown epistemological and critical activity. The novelty of the contemporary period, if any, resides in the way digital technologies have made this double logic of the moving image more present —and more playful— than ever, to the point that it is now internalized, that is, made inescapably constitutive of the production, circulation and reception of most (if not all) audiovisual texts.

Therefore, it is pointless to ask whether digital culture's decentring effect emancipates viewers from fixed subjective formations, and hence from the power relations they imply; *or* if the fragmentation of texts and spectatorship is just another manifestation of capitalism's further extension of the commodification processes that disguise social and economic relations as relations between objects to relations between *fragmented objects*. The ambiguous nature of digital culture should dissuade such binary reasoning and make clear that both hypotheses are valid. In other words, the possibility of playfully and willingly navigating the complex textuality of contemporary audiovisual texts and the variable subject positions they allow, is key to understanding the self-conscious relation with mass culture that contemporary audiovisual culture fosters. Digital culture combines an epistemological potential with a co-option of mass culture that reciprocally feed and reinforce each other.

As a consequence, the self-conscious engagement with contemporary audiovisual culture's ambiguous nature is hardly assurance enough that its epistemological potential will materialize into any critical posture or emancipatory action. Quite the contrary, contemporary audiovisual culture seems to have domesticated modernism's critical possibilities by transforming its formal operations into the activities intrinsic to the everyday reception of so

many contemporary audiovisual texts. Modernism's *critical* potential has been in this way reduced to an empty, perfunctory gesture whose main task is to stimulate a more competent, thorough, and therefore more effective, mode of consumption of contemporary audiovisual texts. Accordingly, the critique of specific audiovisual texts, or of mass culture as a whole for that matter, is not so much abandoned as it is defused, or neutralised. As they are confronted with this epistemological potential —a necessary element of the reception of any audiovisual text—, spectators are continuously *inoculated* against its true critical power. In this way, they become necessarily aware of how the texts they engage with are formed and structured, but they are unable to challenge their very structure of representation, or this structure's contribution to the status quo.

The inoculation against the critical possibilities of modernism is not limited to the engagements with specific audiovisual texts. In fact, contemporary audiovisual culture also seems to inoculate its spectators against any *total theorisation* that accounts for the relation of the entirety of cultural production with capitalism. In this process, the imagination of totality and of forms of resistance to it are not simply dismissed, but always first acknowledged in order to only then be dismissed; or, to put it more exactly, disavowed as unthinkable and un-actable upon, and therefore altogether irrelevant. The activity inherent to the engagement with fragmented audiovisual texts empties the need or the apparent possibility to act on any other level. We can thus understand the decisive importance of the fragmentation and recombination operations internalized by digital delivery technologies, and that are at the centre of the formal operations employed by the digital audiovisual essay: it is in the relation between the fragment and the whole that any emancipatory potential must be found. If, on the one hand, the fragment prevents access to the whole, on the other hand, the fragment might very well be the only way to suspend the whole as something that would supposedly exist beyond the sum of its parts, and suggest the tactical advantages of spending time and effort dismantling it, one piece at a time.

As Terry Eagleton candidly put it, “not looking for totality is just code for not looking at capitalism.” (1996, 11) However, while the discrediting of totality seems in line with the production of textuality that characterizes digital culture,

it is not without its paradoxes. In fact, digital culture discredits totality as much as it provides a total mode of engagement with most, if not all, forms of contemporary audiovisual texts. In other words, the fragmentariness, anti-narrativity and even the brevity of many of the contemporary digitally mediated texts are deployed in a systematic way that seems to deny the very possibility of anti-totality positions. The premise of a sheer refusal of totality is, at any rate, deceptive. As I have tried to show, the migration of the critical potential of a poststructuralist theory of modernism to contemporary digital delivery technologies renders inevitable the acknowledgement of the many contradictions in the relation of contemporary audiovisual culture to mass culture. The straightforward refusal of totality is thus rendered improbable and it might be more adequate to speak instead of the *disavowal* of totality. In other words, digital culture acknowledges the existence of totality as the constitutive other of fragmentation, while at the same time dismissing it as a discredited theoretical attempt to make sense of the world. Here resides not only contemporary audiovisual culture's second main ideological function, but also what distinguishes it from postmodernism: not simply the dismissal of totality, but an internalized form of disavowal that permeates many of the spectatorial everyday engagements with contemporary audiovisual texts.

2.2. The formal operations of the digital audiovisual essay

In the previous section, I argued that modernist formal operations have a rich epistemological potential, which nevertheless has a problematic relation to mass culture. I also argued that this epistemological potential is shaped by the double logic of remediation and has been internalized by digital delivery technologies, now informing most engagements with audiovisual mass culture. Given their centrality to the formal strategies of the digital audiovisual essay, in this section I will discuss the formal operations of *montage*, a key modernist cultural practice and similarly shaped by the double logic of remediation. I will argue that it is the centrality of the formal operations mobilized by montage that allows the digital

audiovisual essay to claim its rich epistemological potential, but that this is also the source of its ambiguous relation to mass culture.

In cinema, montage is often used as a synonym for editing; here, I will reserve the term montage for the reflexive theorizations and practices of editing that mobilize its epistemological potential for critical purposes. This critical potential is not, however, to be taken for granted. Some iterations of montage might not take full advantage of the epistemological discoveries offered by the recombinatory practices of editing, indulging instead in its pedestrian, innocuous use. While this is not necessarily true of earlier practices of cinematic montage, the internalization of the double logic of remediation by digital delivery technologies eventually came to signify the neutralisation of montage's critical potential.

Historically, Soviet Montage has had a foundational role in the theorisation of, and practical experimentation with, formal operations that explore the homology between the activities of the filmmaker and the spectator with the explicit purpose of surveying the epistemological and critical potentials of the moving image. Soviet Montage explored the principle of fragmentation and recombination, as well as the multiple temporalities of the moving image, thus offering a reflection on the acts of mediation and representation. It sparked famous debates around its emancipatory role, seemingly denied by the swift appropriation of many of its formal operations by commercial cinema and other forms of audiovisual mass culture. The *compilation film* tradition will, in turn, be analysed as a markedly self-conscious and reflexive iteration of the formal operations of montage that is typical not only of 20th-century artistic and mass culture practices, but also of contemporary digital culture, and which has proved immensely influential in the development of the digital audiovisual essay.

Finally, in this section I will look at the *remix* as one of the most recent iterations of montage, its controversial relation with mass culture vastly enhanced by the internalization of the epistemological potentials of modernism in everyday engagements with digitally-mediated audiovisual texts. The remix will become, in this light, the representative example of the *interdependency* of critique and consumerism, the pseudo-critical uses of editing, and the domestication of montage, all of which have become commonplace in

contemporary audiovisual culture, providing a more immediate context for the limits and possibilities of the digital audiovisual essay.

Must these formal operations, one might ask, be just a way to define the *legal boundaries* of spectator participation, or do they also point to the possibility of challenging, and perhaps even *negating*, the existence of such boundaries and such pre-programmed spectator activity in the first place? Could the epistemological potential that they internalize be *diverted onto* a truly critical and emancipatory purpose? At the end of this section, I will argue that one might find an example of such a use of these formal operations in the situationist strategy of *détournement* which, instead of leading the spectator through the predetermined legal limits of epistemological activities, seems keener to *tilt* those limits, therefore exposing the confined nature of the spectator's activity.

Analysing the fortunes of montage, from Soviet cinema of the 1920s to the 21st century remix, this section will set the theoretical and historical contexts for the contemporary practices of the digital audiovisual essay, its conditions of possibility and its limits, as well as its ideological functions and political purpose.

2.2.1. Soviet Montage

Montage denotes a group of formal operations and a historically grounded cultural practice—in Soviet Russia, during the 1920s—that explore the *spatial and temporal* dimension of the moving image. Theorized in the context of the cinema and photography, the term montage was applied to other media, and to a wide range of cultural and artistic practices during the 19th and 20th centuries. This, along with its use as a synonym for other artistic techniques and practices, has created a vast terminological amalgamation of contexts where the term is used and misused. A large portion of these terminological confusions comes from the paratactic connotation often attributed to montage, which widely extends the scope of the concept to any combination or juxtaposition of elements that make a cultural text, regardless of the specific ways in which those combinatory practices change pre-existing meanings and contribute to create new ones. Instead of illuminating it, the use of different terms to name different types of

combinatory operations —depending on the media, or on the judgement value attributed to those operations— only added to the confusion around the concept of montage. Discussions of montage have also been complicated further by the fact that, although the anticipation of its effects on the spectator is a basic cornerstone of montage theory, the uncertainty of all artistic combinatory practices, as far as their reception is concerned, was more often than not neglected. In other words, theories of montage seldom question their presumed effectiveness on their spectators. Eisenstein's struggle with the problem of the univocality of meaning in montage is, as we shall see, an important exception.

The distinction between montage as the combination of new works, or of fragments of pre-existing works, might also prove less than helpful. In the context of Soviet cinema, the distinction is at best tenuous. Many soviet filmmakers's work with montage gave rise to the conceptualizations of montage behind *both* the compilation film tradition, and the Soviet cinema of the fictional and documentary traditions. If the combinatory practices of montage can be seen as a commentary on the process of representation, the combination of pre-existing elements must in turn be seen as a commentary about those works' previous meanings and circulation contexts. The critical potential of that commentary will depend on the ways in which the discrete elements that form the work are combined, and on the degree to which the differences between those fragments are underlined or disguised.

Eisenstein's epistemological barricade

According to Jacques Aumont (1987, 155) there were at least three contexts that, "all acting in conjunction," affected Sergei M. Eisenstein's concept of montage: the ideological, the pedagogical, and the epistemological. From an *ideological* point of view, montage was a way to unleash cinema's analytical and critical powers and, thus, to be at the service of Marxism. Soviet films were not conceived, however, to illustrate Marxist ideals, but to embody the "Marxist method itself." (Aumont 1987, 163) As Eisenstein argues, quoting Marx, "the investigation of truth must itself be true." (Michelson 1992, 63) The application

of the principles of montage in these films can be seen, as Annette Michelson puts it, “as a rehearsal of the dialectic.” (1992, 63)⁴³ This is why, in his definitions of montage, Eisenstein proposes what Aumont calls “an ‘extremist’ affirmation of montage,” in which “no discourse is tenable unless it is constructed, no intellectual operation if possible unless it is engineered.” (1987, 151) Against the idea of the romantic artist as creator, Eisenstein sustains that the act of creation is always an act of montage. The “universality of manipulation” (ibidem) extends beyond the specificity of any particular means of expression, but also beyond the activity of the filmmaker. The spectator, as well as the filmmaker, must also be involved in the activity of montage. Montage, in other words, is intrinsically *pedagogical* because it presumes an active spectator who will reconstitute the film and, hence, its “true object,” Marxist theory. According to Eisenstein:

“the strength of montage resides in this, that it involves the creative process, the emotions and mind of the spectator. The spectator is compelled to proceed along the self-same creative path that the author travelled in creating the image (idea). The spectator not only sees the represented elements of the finished work, but also experiences the dynamic process of the emergence and assembly of the image (idea) just as it was experienced by the author.” (“Word and image”, Eisenstein 1948, quoted in Michelson 1992, 63–4)

In this way, montage is a mode of representation that is didactic because it is epistemological, and vice-versa. It is a mode of representation that encourages spectators to make associations themselves, as well as a “mode of inscribing within the film the path of these associations.” (Aumont 1987, 167) This of course raises the issue of univocality, to which Eisenstein had no definitive answer. Aumont sees him involved in the “indefinite pursuit of a contradiction”: on the one hand, trying to suggest associative paths and “rebuses”; on the other hand, acknowledging that a montage of fragments (“let alone one single fragment”) never conveys a univocal meaning to the spectator (Aumont 1987, 168).

⁴³ Eisenstein’s project of adapting *The Capital* might have made this idea literal, but it was Vertov’s *The Man with the Movie Camera* (1929) that first represented “a full articulation of a marxist text”, *The German Ideology* (Michelson 1992, 63).



Figure 10: Eisenstein's depiction of a purely iconic barricade (left), and of a barricade whose iconic organization suggests the image (idea) of revolution (Eisenstein 2010, 24).

In an attempt to overcome this contradiction, Aumont makes the incisive point that the acknowledgement of the intellectual associations produced by the spectator is still based “upon a narrative, representational chain” (176). According to Aumont, Eisenstein distinguishes between two levels of representation: the *figuration* of reality, on an iconic level; and the abstract level of intellectual *images*, or ideas. Eisenstein chooses the example of the representation of a *barricade* to argue that if the objective is to render the idea (the *image*) of *revolution*, then the figuration of the object (the physical barricade) must already include that image (idea) on a metaphorical level (“Montage 1937”, Eisenstein 2010, quoted in Aumont 1987, 175–80). In this case, the figural representation of the barricade must include the reversal that puts the “bottom on top,” thus signalling the *image* of *revolution* [Figure 1]. The important consequence of this notion is that the representation of such an obvious *topos* of the idea of revolution as the barricade is not necessarily enough to generate the idea of revolution. The figuration of the barricade must mimic, on a *perceptual* level, the blocking purpose of the physical and historical barricades: it must *block* a purely iconic representation of the object in order to be able to denote the idea of revolution —often via a *lateral* movement, not unlike the movement of the Paris communards across “pierced” buildings.⁴⁴ Montage, just

⁴⁴ Writing about the barricades during the Paris Commune, Kristin Ross (2008) underlined that they were not used as shelters, but as obstacles intended to “prevent the free circulation of the enemy through the city —to ‘halt’ them or immobilize them so that they, the enemy, could become targets.” (2008, 37) The communards, on the other hand, had mobility on their side, and could engage the enemy from different positions, often moving laterally across buildings that had been previously “pierced” for that purpose.

like the eisensteinian barricade, is a *productive obstacle* to iconic representation always pushing the figural to supersede itself.

If this definition of montage already resonates with the double logic of remediation (inasmuch as it problematizes the dimension of iconic representation of the audiovisual text), it is nevertheless still an incomplete account of its epistemological potential. For that, we must now turn our attention to the important issue of the *temporality* of montage, which in turn highlights the acts of technological mediation supporting the moving image.

Slowing down representation

To Eisenstein, the reorganization of space and time through which montage effects the figuration of reality is but a means for the production of ideas. In this way, montage reproduces thought processes —an analogy exemplified in the way the concept of “internal dialogue” emulated the notion of “stream of consciousness” (Aumont 1987, 189). However, the combinatory principles of montage, along with the interdependency of the iconic and the abstract levels of representation on which it was founded, generated a more complex notion of temporality. If, on the one hand, a film generates a flow of images that echo the incessant stream of human consciousness, on the other hand, the systematic blocking and surpassing of the iconic level of representation that is the engine of montage seems to periodically halt (or bump into) that flow. In other words, montage draws the spectator’s attention as much to that which is represented as to the intelligence behind the film’s organization —thus driving a wedge between the present time of the spectator’s viewing experience, and the pastness of the film’s shooting and editing moments. Montage, in short, exposes cinema’s *multiple temporalities* and makes the spectator aware of their presence as something that is constitutive of each viewing experience. As we shall see in the next section, the exploration of the multiple temporalities of montage would come to be a central aspect of the formal strategies of the compilation film; and it would become one of the most important formal characteristics of the digital audiovisual essay.

While Eisenstein exposed the multiple temporalities of the cinema by focusing on editing strategies, Dziga Vertov focused instead on film's simple optical processes like acceleration, deceleration, the freeze-frame and reverse motion—all of which we shall find systematically employed in the context of the digital audiovisual essay. As Annette Michelson pointed out, the employment of these processes produced “the visible suspension of causal relations within the phenomenal world,” thus allowing for the tracing back of material processes of production (and hence, the exposition of a Marxist worldview), while simultaneously entertaining the “hope that the cinema could be the articulate medium of the master theoretical systems of modernity: psychoanalysis, historical materialism, Einsteinian physics, etc.” (1992, 65) It is important to note that the way in which this was achieved, at least in the Vertovian version of montage, was through the manipulation of reproduced time, that is, through the affirmation that the human sovereignty over time could best be exerted at the editing table. Vertov thus made visible the material processes through which Eisenstein, like any other Marxist worker, produced meaning. The capacity to reveal or disguise these material relations would become central to the critical use of montage or to its domestication—as we shall see, for example, in the discussion of the work of the digital audiovisual essayist ::kogonada, in chapter 3.

Lev Kuleshov's writings on montage, and especially his *experiments*, provide an exemplary synthesis of the issues discussed above: the conflation of the ideological, the didactical and the epistemological potentials of montage; its doubleness as representation/reflexivity; and its manipulation of the multiple temporalities of cinema. The mythical legacy of Kuleshov's experiments⁴⁵—and most especially, the Mozzhukhin test, known abroad as the “Kuleshov effect”—allows us to see montage as the embodiment of an epistemological act whose success depends on the active participation of the spectator. Through the repetition of the same close-up of the actor, edited in rapid alternation with other stock shots, Kuleshov was able to expose not only a fundamental element of meaning-making (namely, its *relational* nature), but also the multiple temporalities that are at work in this process: the shooting of the original shots,

⁴⁵ For a revision of the mythical history of this experiment, and its role in subsequent literature, see, for example, Prince and Hensley (1992).

their editing, and their viewing.⁴⁶ Moreover, the Mozzhukhin experiment illustrates the complicity between the epistemological and the didactic contexts of montage, in the sense that the spectator cannot engage with the film without learning something about the process of cinematographic representation itself. In doing so, spectators are forcibly drawn into the ideological context, insofar as their role as spectators is modified to accommodate their role as someone who can produce meaning not only about the individual work before them, but about cinema as a mediation tool and a mode of representation in general. Kuleshov's experiment is important and remains influential —even *in absentia*, since the Mozzhukhin test didn't survive its time— because it suggests that the “universality of montage” (Eisenstein) is always demonstrated by the literal manipulation of cinema's filmic materials, and that that manipulation is as much a task of the filmmaker as it is of the spectator.

Soviet montage theory, as well as its practice, grounded itself on formal operations that still guide, as we shall see, the contemporary practice of the digital audiovisual essay. First, we have the “principle of the fragment,” whose recombination will reveal montage as a relational and “discursive” activity (Amiel 2014); that is, an activity that not only conveys a meaning to the spectator, but also the relations that make that meaning intelligible to the spectator as a constructed, organized discourse. The discursive quality of montage depends on two specific forms of manipulation of the moving image. On the one hand, we have the editing strategies that allow fragments to simultaneously accumulate autonomous and relational meanings. The clash between fragments, whose relation escapes a literal, representational interpretation, creates forms of so-called “intellectual montage”. Here, moving beyond mere representation, the recombinatory strategies of montage mobilize instead a series of complex rhetorical figures such as metaphors, synecdoches, gradations, repetitions, antithesis, ellipsis, accumulations, etc. (Amiel 2014, 68ff.) With powerful analytical and comparative affordances, many of these rhetorical strategies will be widely employed by digital audiovisual essays.

⁴⁶ The awareness of the temporal gaps is doubled by the spatial one, the geographical distance between two shots — a technique Kuleshov theorized in the concepts of “artificial landscape” and “creative geography” (Kuleshov 1974, 3).

On the other hand, montage's manipulation acquires a more literal, material expression, whenever it implies the changing of the flow of the moving image. Stopping, repeating, reversing, or speed altering, again, will come to be key strategies that the digital audiovisual essay also employs systematically. Here, and as Kuleshov famously showed, the discursive quality of montage is revealed as a material process that requires the technical manipulation of the moving image. The filmmaker becomes the first spectator of his own work; and the spectator necessarily replicates the filmmakers' work (itself a self-conscious manipulation of montage) in the very act of reading an image.

Meaning emerges, then, both from *material* and *intellectual* manipulation of the moving image. While this process results in obviously manipulated images, it also leads to an understanding that it is always possible to manipulate images, and, furthermore, that they ought to be perceived as *always-already manipulated*. The lessons of Soviet Montage would be well absorbed by digital audiovisual essayists, who acted on the similar premise that the more manipulated an image is, the truer and the more authentic it would become. In other words, Soviet Montage paved the way for the processual method of meaning-formation that digital essaying, through the development of the affordances of digital editing and viewing technologies, has adopted and considerably expanded as its paramount formal operation.

2.2.2. Critical montage? The compilation film

Understood as a self-reflexive and critical mode of editing that depends on specific formal strategies, montage has been employed across a variety of film genres and well beyond the chronology and ideological objectives of its original context of creation —much to the dismay of its supporters, when not the delight of its critics. However, nowhere has the epistemological potential of montage been made more obvious, and its ambiguous relation to *mass culture* more problematic, than in the *compilation film* tradition.

The compilation film tradition has been inscribed in the history of the cinematic avant-gardes, where it can be seen as the logical development of a

process that tried to assert cinema's identity through the foregrounding of montage and other reflexive strategies. In fact, the recombination of pre-existing moving images clearly aligns the compilation film with the north-American, experimental and reflexive tradition of the found footage. However, the representational quality of those recombined images also lingers in the compilation film, and therefore also inscribes this type of films in the European, realist and indexical traditions of the essay film and the modern documentary (Blümlinger 2013, 78–9).

In one of the first attempts to define this cultural practice, Jay Leyda (1964) considered a host of terms, such as “archive films,” “library films,” “stock-shot films,” “documentary archive films,” “chronicle montage films,” or the French “films de montage,” before settling for the concept of “compilation film,” which he used hesitantly and in a provisional way, inviting the reader to find a better one. The most suitable term, Leyda argued, should necessarily comprise the three defining characteristics he attributed to this type of films: that they begin at the cutting table; that the pre-existent used films “originated at some time in the past”; and finally, that the result is necessarily a “film of idea,” or in other words, something that transforms and supersedes the status of “mere records or documents” of the used films (1964, 9). Leyda's is not a consensual term, but I shall use it instead of the popular alternative “found footage,” because while the “compilation film” also draws attention to its origin in pre-existent materials, it seems to me that it underscores more emphatically the *activity* inherent in the creation of these films—even if the verb “to compile” is somewhat misleading inasmuch as it points to what might appear like fairly unsophisticated or presumably neutral forms of manipulation.

In Leyda's account, the compilation film's history can be traced back to the origins of cinema itself, even if its self-conscious practice dates only from the 1920s and the soviet theorization of montage. In spite of Vertov's earlier use of previously-shot sequences for his *Kino-Pravda* newsreel (for practical as much as aesthetic reasons), Leyda affords Esfir Shub's *Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* (1927) a more foundational role in the history of the compilation film. This is probably because the film fits more neatly into Leyda's three-part definition of the method, as described above. In his view, the identity of the compilation film is

tied not only to the employment of montage, but specifically to the choice of pre-existent images and to the “idea,” that is, to the new meaning that is attributed to them. In other words, it is not so much the simple use of pre-existent images that defines the compilation film, but rather the degree to which the temporal and semantic distance between the old images and their new re-organization exists and is made visible. In this way, the compilation film’s identity is made to hinge on the extent to which it changes the meaning of older images, and also the extent to which that change is made noticeable to the spectator. This aspect helps us understand the decisive importance of the compilation film tradition for the digital audiovisual essay. Also invested in the reflexive use of editing and the re-combination of previously existing moving images, digital essaying is similarly interested not only in uncovering hidden meanings, but also in what this playful manipulation can tell us about the conditions of existence of these texts in the context of mass, digitally-mediated audiovisual culture.

An inherently reflexive activity

The compilation film works as a self-conscious exploration of editing, making it not only its *method*, but also its object and its constitutive *theme*. The compilation film establishes the *inherently reflexive qualities of montage*. It does so in a particularly acute way because it always departs from the existing moving images of which it makes use. It is in this sense that I argue that the compilation film *thematizes* editing’s potential as an epistemological tool in the processes of representation and mediation, a potential that is dependent on the relation between combinatory and representational strategies to hide or disclose the material relations governing the production and reception of moving images and sounds, and on a spectator that is made aware of those strategies.

To “supervis[e] the process by which representation is made intelligible to a viewer” (Sjöberg 2001, 27) the compilation film mobilizes different rhetorical figures such as *displacement*, *repetition* or *interruption*. The compilation film displaces moving images from their original contexts and recombines them with the purpose of exploiting the “discrepancies between the

image's original and present functions." (Wees 1993, 13) These discrepancies are not disguised, and neither is the fact that the film originates from different sources. On the contrary, the compilation film's particular use of disparate elements "prompts us to recognize an appropriateness in their juxtaposition." (Wees 1993, 13) Consequentially, found footage films' use of montage "encourage[s] a more analytical reading (which does not necessarily exclude a greater aesthetic appreciation) than the footage originally received" (Wees 1993, 11). In this process of displacement, the temporal dimensions of representation are underlined, drawing the spectator's attention "to the way the depicted returns as the same, but different" (Sjöberg 2001, 31).

Patrick Sjöberg has emphasised the importance of *repetition* in the textual organization of the compilation film, as much as in its perceptual experience by the spectator —either as a repeated fragment inside the compilation film, or as a fragment taken from a previous context of production and exhibition. Repetition, Sjöberg argues, involves a distortion and a delay in relation to previous perceptual experiences of the same moving images that, in addition to the awareness of their material displacement into a new text (the compiled film), have a powerful epistemological potential.

This distortion introduces a perceptual interruption not unlike that of Eisenstein's epistemological barricade. To William C. Wees (1993), *interruption* is indeed the chief creative device of the compilation film. He described it as either *extrinsic* (the choice of films to be used, and thus to have their original context interrupted) or *intrinsic* (the discontinuities resulting from montage, or from the modification of the image's quality: speed and direction changes; synchronization with other sounds or voice over) (1993, 58). Even in the cases when narrative, thematic, graphic, rhythmic or sonic continuities are established, the fact that they bridge materials from different sources can introduce a sense of "discontinuity, a gap or interruption in the flow" (ibidem) of the found footage film and stimulate the spectator to look at it as if it was in quotation marks, that is, as the result of the filmmaker's agency and re-organizing intelligence.

Being encouraged to see the images under such a light of self-reflexiveness, some authors argue that the spectator is also encouraged to "think about [them] more critically —which is to say, more politically" (Wees 1993, 55).

To William C. Wees, the compilation film is “a creative technique that is also a critical method.” (Wees 1993, 52) This critical potential encouraged by the compilation film derives from the fact that its self-reflexive imperative is directed not only at the texts themselves (how their self-reflexive organization reveals something about the process of representation itself), but also at the context of mass circulation of those texts. William Wees distinguishes between these two levels as “micro-” and “macro-montage,” arguing that all compilation films are not only self-referential, but also media-referential, in the sense that they “cannot avoid calling attention to the ‘mediascape’ from which they come, especially when they also share the media’s forms and rhetorical strategies of montage.” (Wees 1993, 25) Likewise, this will be a core meaning-formation strategy of digital essaying. As my examples in the next chapter will show, the work of ::kogonada or Catherine Grant, for example, is founded upon a systematic exploration of the different semiotic possibilities offered by editing techniques in bridging or interrupting meaning across different audiovisual texts.

Therefore, the epistemological potential of the compilation film is twofold, for it examines “not only (...) how well [pre-existing moving images] serve the needs of the work in which they now appear, but also (...) what they reveal about their original function in whatever cultural artefact they first appeared.” (1993, 58) The latter examination is of paramount importance to Wees. The properly critical and political potential of the compilation film emerges because these films can examine not only their process of representation, but also the media context in which that process takes place. Explicitly acknowledging the Situationist strategy of “détournement,” Wees argues for a similar ability to act not only as a critique of representation, but also of the “mediascape” (Wees’ term) in which that representation takes place. Wees contends that the role of montage in the compilation film (what he calls “micro-montage”), is to mimic and mock media strategies and, in particular, to criticize how television, cinema, radio, and the press “use montage to give their discrete units of information some semblance of formal coherence” (“macro-montage”) (1993, 25).

Temporal and archival explorations of the film material

The mobilization of montage to recombine pre-existing audiovisual texts —both to explore the rudiments of the meaning-formation of individual texts and to explore the circulation contexts in which they exist— does not exhaust the semiotic possibilities of the compilation film. Through the disruption of the flow of the moving image, found footage films also underline the *temporal* dimensions that are constitutive of the organization and perception of audiovisual texts. In an extreme example, Christa Blümlinger suggests that multi-channel video art installations spatialise the performative and analytical experience of cinema (2013, 44), thus offering a possible answer to the methodological problem of comparing moving images in single-screen devices. In this context, what was previously a matter of memory (remembering a flow of successive moving images) becomes a matter of comparison between simultaneously presented moving images. Making a crucial point, Blümlinger explains that the multiplication of images that the multi-channel video installation so aptly illustrates is to be understood less as a consequence or a metaphor of the proliferation of copies in contemporary audiovisual culture, than as the re-enactment of the perceptual operations of the spectator during the reception of the individual audiovisual text.

On the other hand, the compilation film also draws attention to the *materiality* of cinema, thus adding yet another layer to its temporal perception by the spectator. The compilation film harbours moving images rescued from obscurity in film archives, from the frantic pace of commercial circulation, or from the ephemeral and marginal roles mainstream audiovisual culture had assigned to them (Grainge 2011). In this sense, the compilation film is, arguably, always “meta-archival” (Blümlinger 2013, 34) and always involves what Blümlinger calls a “double reflexivity” (ibidem) —on a textual and perceptual level, as well as on a material one. To confront oneself, Blümlinger argues, with “the intertextual and intermedial operations of actualization of cinematic images ‘re-read’ through the avant-garde cinema, the essay film and the new media art, demands that we also analyse the image conservation and re-organizing dispositifs that we use in different circumstances.” (2013, 34)

By making the origin of their composite nature evident, the compilation film supplements the multiple temporalities of the moving image with a sense of its material and archival history, as well as of its place in the economy of audiovisual culture. The spectator of the compilation film is then made aware not only of the conflation of past and present in each audiovisual text, but also of the overlapping temporalities of the diverse material origins and trajectories that support the existence and the experience of those texts.

Digital compilations

How has the contemporary context of digitally-mediated audiovisual culture affected the self-reflexive imperative of the compilation film? To answer this question, the same, cautious premise must be adopted as before: while digital technologies might have increased the reflexive drive of the compilation film, this is not to say that critical thought has automatically been embedded in it. And to re-centre our discussion on cinema, to postulate that digitally produced compilation films have advanced the understanding of how specific films work (or even of how cinematic montage works) does not imply any corresponding increase in the critical awareness of how cinema is produced, circulated and received in the contemporary digital world.

With the aid of digital viewing and editing techniques, the compilation film seems to have taken the exploration of the multiple temporalities associated with the production and reception of the digitally mediated audiovisual texts one step further. The same is true of the exploration of the material qualities of the recombined moving images that fuel the compilation film. This is not to say that these issues were not relevant in the context of previous practices of the compilation film. Digital technologies have merely made these aspects of the compilation film's exploration of montage more salient, a process that is not without some remarkable paradoxes. The apparent de-materialization of cinema brought about by its digital forms of mediation seems to have rather emphasised its material qualities and the historical trajectories of those images. And if the modalities of digital mediation seem to encourage the urgency, the uniqueness

and the presentness of each viewing situation, we have already seen that the compilation film can foster the understanding of the multiple temporalities that are at stake in the moving image.

Blümlinger is quick to add that this does not mean that the compilation film, as an aesthetic form, can be reduced to its technological support. Nevertheless, she makes a compelling case for the epistemological potential of the re-combinatory possibilities of the compilation film, such as they have been exponentially augmented by digital (editing, circulation and presentation) technologies. In this technological context, the compilation film should be understood as a “meta-film” (2013, 79), on the aesthetic and semiotic level, but also on the level of the materials that are also constitutive of every moving image. In doing so, Blümlinger is not so much claiming that compilation films do what other films cannot do, rather that they do more *evidently* what *all* films — that is, *cinema*— *always* does. More than the development of new techniques or effects, then, digital technologies *highlight re-combinatory practices* (“pratiques d’élaboration secondaire”, Blümlinger 2013, 25) in a way that encourages the understanding of the fundamental historical functions and aesthetic nature of the audiovisual texts.

However, and as Wees was the first to admit, to argue that the compilation film underlines the inherently *reflexive* qualities of montage does not mean that these qualities will also be inherently *critical*. Reflexive at it may be, the compilation film is hardly the straightforward equivalent of critical thought, either when it comes to the understanding of the meaning-formation process, or, more importantly, when it comes to taking stock of the politics and the economy of the processes of production, circulation and reception of contemporary mass culture.

Montage’s ambiguous relation to mass culture

The example of the compilation film shows that the value and effectiveness of the lessons of montage is far from consensual. Commercial cinema and advertising’s easy assimilation of montage strategies, tested by avant-garde and compilation

films, sparked the suspicions of cultural critics. Just how emancipatory could montage be if it was so quick to consort with mass culture? This was the question central to the key debate about montage between Benjamin and Adorno. While Benjamin (2008) insisted on montage's emancipatory potential, Adorno saw it as contributing to nothing short of the "capitulation of art to what stands heterogeneously opposed to it" (2002, 155). These varying judgements were made at different historical moments. Writing after World War II and from the vantage point of the world's centre of mass cultural production (the US), Adorno saw montage's original potential to subvert a work's integrity as "neutralized." Adorno attributed this failure to the transformation of a once restricted artistic practice into a constitutive element of mass culture:

"The principle of montage was conceived as an act against a surreptitiously achieved organic unity; it was meant to shock. Once this shock is neutralized, the assemblage once more becomes merely indifferent material; the technique no longer suffices to trigger communication between the aesthetic and the extra-aesthetic, and its interest dwindles to a cultural-historical curiosity. If, however, as in the commercial film, the intentions of montage are insisted upon, they are jarringly heavy-handed." (Adorno 2002, 156)

This sense of the waning of the critical potential of montage by fragmenting and combining elements from cultural texts, in a period when those texts are perceived as always already fragmented, seemed predominant after the cultural diagnosis of postmodernism. The disbelief in montage was neatly summarized by Christopher Philips' remarks, in the early 1990s, that "montage may in fact no longer offer the most satisfying or audacious way to represent our own 'culture of fragments'" (1992, 35). Already the case with all non-linear playback devices, such as video and DVD players, but more so after the availability of cable TV and VOD, and particularly of the massive online video databases that, combined with portable screen devices, allow for ubiquitous non-linear viewing practices, nowadays digital delivery technologies have internalized montage. They stimulate viewing practices that necessarily fragment, re-combine and change the flow of audiovisual texts in order for the spectator to engage with them, therefore transforming montage into an everyday

viewing practice that has the epistemological potential to reveal something about the conditions of representation and technological mediation of the audiovisual text, as well as the centrality of the spectator in that epistemological discovery.

It would be easy to characterise the internalization of modernist formal operations by digital delivery technologies as the confirmation of a long historical process of cyclical frustration vis-à-vis these operations' epistemological and emancipatory potentials. This perspective would consolidate the dubious notion that modernism can exist outside mass culture and capitalism, criticizing it provisionally until it is appropriated and curtailed, allowing the process to resume anew, in the context of some other cultural space or of a new delivery technology. As a consequence, the emancipatory potential of modernist formal operations would forever be thrown further into the past, where it would have existed in a "purer" form, having thus been able to resist mass culture for a longer period, or in more significant ways.

As I have suggested above, the concept of remediation provides an alternative to this cyclical view of the emancipatory/appropriation potential of modernist formal operations. We need not see the recent internalization of these formal operations by digital delivery technologies as the *confirmation* of their supposed exhaustion and appropriation by mass culture *after* an initial period in which their critical and disruptive potentials would have been militantly demonstrated by the historical European avant-gardes of the early 20th century. On the contrary, I would argue that montage and its constitutive formal operations have not so much been *appropriated* by mass culture as they have always been entangled with it. From this perspective, contemporary audiovisual culture's recent internalization of modernist formal operations such as montage, through digital delivery technologies, merely reveals their *structural*, and by now full-fledged, *collusion with capitalism*. This will prove a divisive issue for the practices of the digital audiovisual essay analysed in chapter 3: while some essayists take full advantage of the epistemological affordances of digital editing technologies to engage meaningfully with specific filmic texts, many of them still fall short of acknowledging how their own work is caught up in —although in a

highly conscious and sophisticated fashion, granted— the cycles of audiovisual consumerism.

2.2.3. Vernacular montage: the Remix

Many digital recombinatory practices seem keen on renewing Wees' concerns that the compilation film is destined to become ever more complicit and a-critical in its relation to mass culture as it becomes more reflexive. The tension between the epistemological and critical affordances of editing is nowhere more noticeable in contemporary audiovisual culture than in the practice of the Remix. Like the compilation film, a self-conscious exploration of editing, the practice of the Remix is, however, much more disseminated, as its formal operations have become constitutive of almost every digitally mediated viewing experience. In contemporary audiovisual culture, the Remix is, in other words, the product and the precondition of both the unprecedented vulgarisation of the epistemological potential of montage *and* of the pedestrian uses of editing that frustrate its critical possibilities. The Remix is, as Lev Manovich (2009) put it, a *vernacular montage* of sorts. It is also what bands together several contemporary cultural practices, quite numerous in the context of the social media of the Web 2.0, such as the *mashup-up* or the *supercut*⁴⁷. In other words, the Remix gives form to cultural practices that, much like the digital audiovisual essay, are the everyday manifestations of the widespread internalization of the epistemological potentials of montage in digital culture. These cultural practices have strongly *influenced*, and *competed* with, the digital audiovisual essay, both from a formal and structural point of view, and also in the sense that they contribute to the development of methods of film analysis that exist beyond academic confines. As the work of ::kogonada will show, the influence of such cultural practices carries with it the full heritage of the ambiguous relation of montage to mass-produced and widely circulated audiovisual culture.

⁴⁷ On the mashup, see Navas, Gallagher, and Burrough (2014); and Navas (2012); on the supercut, see McCormack (2011) and Baio (2014). The influence of these cultural practices in digital essaying will be analysed in chapter 3.

Remixability everywhere

In spite of its widespread use, and of having become, as Lev Manovich puts it, a “truism” of contemporary audiovisual culture, the concept of the “remix” has received little critical attention in the academic context. In its most common uses, the term is synonymous with the recyclability and appropriation that would characterise the contemporary audiovisual scene as a “remix culture.” Some of the earliest studies about the Remix addressed the copyright issues that arise from the re-use of audiovisual texts, thus echoing prevailing concerns about remix culture: how it affects current notions of legal authorship, and how such notions collide with the freedom of political and artistic expression opened up by digital technologies (Lessig 2008). Traditionally, the formal operations of remix culture are not relevant to this interpretation. Against this general trend, however, Lev Manovich has specifically focused on the formal operations of remix culture (2007 and 2009), and Eduardo Navas has also devoted an entire book (2012) to the subject. Both authors distinguish between the cultural forms of remix culture —the *remixes*— and their formal operations, —the remixing activity proper or, in Navas’ analysis, the “Remix.”⁴⁸

Manovich offers two definitions of the Remix: one very open and vague — which makes it possible to speak of *remixability* as a feature of *all* cultural forms—; and a second, more restrictive one, belonging a specific historical period, which rests upon the concept of *modularity* in digital computerisation. His first definition of remixing presents it as “any reworking of already existing cultural work(s)” (2007). This broad definition acknowledges the generalization of the concept after its original use in the context of electronic music (song *remixes*), a filiation aptly described by Navas, whose origins lie in the Jamaican dub of the 1960s, having later influenced 1970s New York’s disco style, hip hop in the 1980s and culminating in contemporary musical practices that use digital recording and mixing equipment (Navas 2012, 20–2). In the early 21st century, Manovich argues, the term was applied to other media besides music, such as “visual projects, software, literary texts” (2007). Later it would also be applied to

⁴⁸ I will follow Navas’ convention of distinguishing the *Remix* qua ensemble of formal operations, from the *remix* qua individual cultural text.

audiovisual culture (video mashups, etc.). Specific remixes, and audiovisual ones in particular, are surprisingly absent, though, from both authors' theorisations.

As a form of "reworking" previously existing texts, Manovich can easily multiply the precedents for the Remix in other historical times, arguing for example that "Ancient Rome remixed Ancient Greece; Renaissance remixed antiquity; nineteenth century European architecture remixed many historical periods including the Renaissance; and today graphic and fashion designers remix together numerous historical and local cultural forms, from Japanese Manga to traditional Indian clothing." (2009, 44) To this list he also adds collage, photomontage, Pop Art, appropriation art and video art. Although too generic to be of use, this long list of examples does make clear Manovich's point about the existence of a continuum between what he calls "traditional cultural remixability," that is, Remix in an artistic context, and "vernacular remixability," or Remix outside such a context, in the everyday engagements of users and spectators with both high culture and mass-produced cultural texts (2009, 44).

Manovich distinguishes the formal operations of the Remix from other concepts such as appropriation, quoting, collage and *montage* (2007). To Manovich, *appropriation* never quite left the artistic field, nor has it reached as wide a use as remixing. The concept also seems to him inadequate to describe the "systematic re-working of a source" that characterises remixability. Appropriation consists in a copy or a transfer of an original, displaced to a different context, rather than in its modification. *Quoting* also seems to Manovich an inadequate comparison. "If remixing implies systematically rearranging the whole text," he argues, "quoting refers to inserting some fragments from old text(s) into the new one." (2007) Quoting is not so much a precursor to remixing, Manovich adds, as it is to *sampling*, a concept that emerged in the context of the technical processes of electronic music remixes, and that Navas will name as a prerequisite for the existence of remixing altogether. Navas argues that sampling is cutting a fragment from an "archive of representations of the world," (2012, 12) and thus equates this operation with the generic act of *recording*, applying it to different media, from photography to electronic music, and from cinema to video (2012, 11–31). For Navas, there can be no remixing without sampling, and

there is always some form of remixing whenever there is a form of sampling (see below).

The possibilities opened up by electronic and digital sampling allow Manovich to make a further distinction between the activity of remixing music and video texts, and the formal operations of *montage* —which he uses as a synonym for editing (2007). Here, and contrary to Navas, Manovich makes some important distinctions between digital audiovisual remixing and previous artistic operations. These distinctions are, however, problematic. Contrary to montage, Manovich contends, samples can be arranged in *loops*. While this might be true of photomontage, it is certainly not the case with the analog form of cinematic montage. Here, just like in a digital editing process (but admittedly not as easily), the same series of photograms can be duplicated and inserted repeatedly into a new negative. The second difference must be met with the same objection. Manovich argues that samples can be mixed in a *variety* of ways, that is, they are not simply copied, but their features can be manipulated during sampling (changes in speed, tone, etc.) Sampling would therefore *blend*, rather than *clash* discrete elements. Again, this is an operation that analog cinematic editing can also do, even if with less ease than its digital counterpart (even the simplest double exposure effect carried out a *blending* of two shots).

Sensing perhaps the difficulty in distinguishing the Remix from other historical re-combinatory practices, *while at the same time* arguing that remixability is inherent in all cultural forms, Manovich presents a second definition of remixability, displacing its distinctiveness via the concept of *modularity*. While the idea of modularity explains the potential remixability of all cultural forms, it also points to a different kind of Remix, one that can do without human agency because it is inscribed in cultural forms on a structural (informational) level. Manovich borrows this concept from the context of industrial production, where modularity can be defined as the organizing principle according to which “standardised mass produced parts (...) fit together in a standardised way” (2009). Similarly, cultural modularity points to the existence of a finite number of elements available to create new cultural texts. The “standard twentieth century notion of cultural modularity” Manovich claims, “involved artists, designers or architects making finished works from the small

vocabulary of elemental shapes, or other modules.” (2009) Cultural modularity is similar to industrial modularity, Manovich adds, if one thinks of the carriers of cultural content, but not in terms of the actual production of content. In spite of the impressive developments in its modes of circulation, Manovich argues that “mass culture [still] involves putting together new products —films, television programmes, songs, games— from a limited repertoire of themes, narratives, icons using a limited number of conventions,” a task performed by “the teams of human authors on a one by one basis.” (2009)

In the age of digital information, though, Manovich is able to imagine a prospective scenario in which “computerization modularizes culture on a structural level” (2009). By this he implies a principle of organization of information without any predefined vocabulary, and in which “any well-defined part of any finished cultural object can automatically become a building block for new objects in the same medium. Parts can even ‘publish’ themselves and other cultural objects can ‘subscribe’ to them the way you subscribe now to RSS feeds or podcasts.” (2009) Computerized modularity does away with the idea of a limited diversity or a predefined vocabulary for cultural production, but more importantly, with the role of human agency in the process of modularization of culture.

Manovich’s definition of the formal operations of remixing is flawed in at least three crucial ways. First, he presents no elucidation as to the contradictory claims that remixability is inherent in cultural creation and communication and, on the other hand, that the Remix acts upon the structural integrity of previously existent cultural works. This is nowhere more obvious than in his contradictory claim that remixes can be conceived “*beforehand* as something [an un-remixed *whole*] that will be remixed, sampled, taken apart and modified.” (2007; my emphasis) This contradiction is reinforced by his notion that remixers are elite consumers or avant-garde artists that act on mass-produced cultural forms from an outside, that is, presumably from the exterior of mass production processes. Manovich seems to overlook the fact that poststructuralism had already postulated textuality as the precondition for the production, circulation and reception of all cultural texts. He seems, instead, to push the possibility of a

textual mode of *production* of cultural forms to a *future* when computerized modularization has become the norm.

Even if Manovich's wide definition of the Remix only differentiates it from earlier artistic practices in rather problematic terms, his notion of a change introduced in digitally mediated culture warrants a closer look. His argument is not very linear. In spite of being modularized from the perspective of its *carriers*, he argues, culture is not yet modular from a *structural* point of view. Modularization is, then, not only a property of cultural forms, an organizing principle of their mass production, but also a transformative activity that can re-organize—that is, *modularize*—culture from the “outside,” that is, from the users' side. As users and fans sample and remix their favourite TV shows, songs, and movies, Manovich comes full circle, defining the Remix as a way to modularise culture extraneously. In this way, the widespread practice of the Remix becomes an important extension of the more limited avant-garde practices, which remain within the context of art. Remixing allows consumers to do with mass culture what artists did with art throughout the 20th century, though, in the case of the latter, within a rather narrow scope. Writing in 2007, just when this change was about to be felt, Manovich is anticipating rather than describing the effects of the modularization of digitally mediated culture. Therefore, he is unable to fully appreciate the momentous break the Remix represents as a form of (internalized) *vernacular montage* that is not only available to all spectators, but also constitutive of the ways they engage with digitally mediated audiovisual texts.

Lastly, failing to see the importance of the argument that 21st century spectators employ on a daily basis the formal operations previously limited to avant-garde artists, Manovich utterly ignores the role of the Remix in contemporary mass culture. Because the Remix is not seen as a continuation of the modernist dialogue with mass culture, Manovich provides no answer to a series of important questions about the role of remix culture in that dialogue. What does the claim that remixing modularises mass culture from its outside really imply about the outcome of that engagement? Is mass culture subverted by the formal operations of remixing? Or is remixing just another way to extend mass culture's grip on the consumer? Are remixers enlightened consumers, or

are they challenging their role as consumers of mass produced culture? Although Manovich doesn't acknowledge these questions explicitly, the answers that can be drawn from his definition of the Remix point to its complicity with mass culture. His underlining of both the individual agency of the remixer, and of the autonomy of mass culture's texts seem to side with Theodor Adorno's point, cited by Manovich, that the individuality of both the product and its consumer only reinforces the ideology of mass culture, "in so far as the illusion is conjured up that the completely reified and mediated is a sanctuary from immediacy and life" (Adorno 1975, quoted in Manovich 2009). But is this the only insight the Remix can help us reach about how audiovisual mass culture works today? When all is said and done, isn't this description of the simple domination mechanisms of mass culture still an all-too *benign* interpretation of contemporary capitalism?

Learning under the influence of consumption

The relation between the Remix and mass culture lies at the centre of Eduardo Navas' analysis. In Navas' account, the different technological possibilities of sampling—or of different recording technologies—, have generated historical stages of remixing, which he describes exhaustively (2012, 17–9), before describing the "Regenerative Remix" as the one "specific to new media and networked culture":

"The Regenerative Remix takes place when Remix as discourse becomes embedded materially in culture in non-linear and ahistorical fashion. The Regenerative Remix is specific to new media and networked culture. Like the other remixes it makes evident the originating sources of material, but unlike them it does not necessarily use references or samplings to validate itself as a cultural form. Instead, the cultural recognition of the material source is subverted in the name of practicality—the validation of the Regenerative Remix lies in its functionality." (Navas 2010)

According to Navas, the Remix, like the compilation film, is always necessarily a meta-activity, in the double sense that it engages the remixer in a form of activity that is in itself of a reflexive nature. However, Navas argues that

if the remix involves a “practical awareness,” it does not necessarily entail any “critical reflection” (2012, 104). The remix, Navas concludes using an Adornian expression, is thus of a “regressive” nature in terms of its relation to mass culture (2012, 28, 91–2). Recovering Adorno’s musical example, Navas reminds us that the regressive listener was “the person who does not want to listen critically to anything that challenges her beliefs, but instead wants to hear something familiar in what is supposedly ‘new.’” (2012, 91) “Metaphorically speaking,” Navas continues, the user “wants a remix of what is already understandable.” (2012, 91) The Remix then reveals its ideological function as an enforcer of *repetition* and *regression*, which are the backbone of mass culture. Unlike the Adornian listener, however, the remixer is not a passive receiver. Instead, he is involved in a form of consumption that implies a form of activity, even if it is determined by repetition. In line with Jenkins’ notion of participatory culture, Navas argues that the remixer is a consumer that must *contribute* in order to consume. The Remix, Navas concludes, can then “become a popular aesthetic because it lends itself, both formally and ideologically, to the bottom line of capitalist interests.” (2012, 171)

There is one final feature of the Remix that might complicate this view of its regressive nature, and of its *univocal* complicity with the ideology of mass culture. If, as Manovich puts it, “culture has always been about remixability,” (2009) current digital network communications have made this remixability available to all the participants of Internet culture. Manovich argues that the quantitative aspect of this change is, of course, important in itself, but not as much as the *collaborative* aspect of the Web 2.0 Remix. Like Manovich, Lessig (2008, 77–81) also pins the novelty and importance of remix culture on its collective and collaborative nature. As opposed to previous re-combinatory practices, the contemporary Remix takes full advantage of the amount of information stored on the Internet (the material that the remix will recombine), as well as of its vast audience. Remixes are then made, Lessig argues, by taking into account their reception within a “community of remixers” who share what they have produced, thus encouraging each other to continue and to improve their remixes. Participation is “compelling,” Lessig adds, not only because of the

technical ease that allows the production of remixes, but also because of their reception in this communal context.

More than the possibility to create more remixes than ever, Lessig underlines how this participatory context might stimulate learning experiences. These experiences are connected to the very act of showing, which, Lessig argues “is valuable, even when the stuff produced is not.” (2008, 77) Taking up Henry Jenkins’ ideas about the pedagogical potential of convergence culture and its challenge to traditional educational models, Lessig argues that remixing provides an alternative “interest-based learning” model (80) and one in which remixers, more importantly, “learn by remixing.” (82) This learning potential of the Remix is not grounded on any factual contents, but rather on their organization as a particular text. “Indeed,” Lessig contends, remixers “learn more about the form of expression they remix than if they simply made that expression directly.” (82) This is why the benefits from this practical form of learning are greater than the quality of individual remixes (81). The question then arises: will the learning potential, that Manovich and Lessig ascribe to the formal operations of the remix, outweigh Navas’ view that this form of “practical awareness” prevents “critical reflection”, simply transforming remixers into learners in order to create more *competent*, and more *willing* consumers?

What the Remix suggests is that in contemporary audiovisual culture, more than ever before, critical activities and consumerism are *interdependent, mutually reinforcing each other*. Vernacular montage, made intrinsic to viewing because of modularisation, does not mean that everything can be remixed, but that everything is experienced as always-already remixed. Remixing is not the *consequence* of digitally mediated culture, but its *condition*. Rather than underlining that more spectators can do it, and *are* doing it, the point is that more are now *required* to do it. The playful engagement with audiovisual texts that necessarily illustrates the arbitrary nature of textual and subject formations is currently a widespread and effective tool for incrementing the consumption of those same texts. Embodying the double logic of remediation to make a pseudo-critical activity constitutive of the act of reception, the Remix enforces the two key ideological functions of digitally mediated audiovisual culture I have

identified in the previous section: the inoculation against critical thought and the disavowal of totality.

These are the conditions of existence that also inform the digital audiovisual essay, a text that, by putting montage at the centre of its formal strategies, similarly embodies the interdependency of critique and consumerism. Its challenge, then, is to disentangle its critical posture from the demands of enhanced consumerism, a task that would require the audiovisual essay to deny its own function *while* fulfilling it. Difficult as it might seem, this is not an impossible task, as the Situationist strategy of *détournement* has historically demonstrated, acknowledging its ambiguous relation with mass culture not to reiterate it, but instead as the first step to *tilt* and negate it.

2.2.4. Negating montage: Détournement

Guy Debord and Gil Wolman first presented the strategy of *détournement* in an article published in 1956 (Debord and Wolman 1956). In this manifesto-like text, they defended *détournement* as a critical strategy of displacement and estrangement of mass culture. Oriented towards literature, graphic design, and especially cinema —considered the medium where it could be more effective— *détournement* consisted of a radical juxtaposition of different texts and images, and more specifically, in the context of film, the suspension or modification of sound-image coordination and the physical degradation of the original text's support (what the authors call the “chiselling” of the filmic image).

The strategy of *détournement* was to be placed at the service of class struggle, thus becoming a first attempt to devise a “real means of proletarian artistic education, the first step toward a literary communism.” (Debord and Wolman 1956) In view of this ambitious objective, the entirety of humanity's cultural heritage was potentially the object of *détournement's* militant efforts. “Anything can be used,” Debord and Wolman assure us, but if some films might deserve to be détourned in its entirety (their example was D.W. Griffith's *The*

*Birth of a Nation*⁴⁹), most moving images only “merit being cut up to compose other works.” (1956) Debord and Wolman founded the combinatory operations of *détournement* upon the rather Kuleshovian principle that a spectator always establishes a relation between two shots, no matter how far apart their original contexts may be. In this way, *détournement* succeeds in recovering the re-combinatory principle of the compilation film and its ambition to encompass the realms not only of the history of cinema, but also of television and video images. And indeed, the compilation film, either in its documentary essay trend or in its avant-garde version, does seem to have provided an important model for Debord’s practice as a filmmaker.

Electing as his inspirational models Brecht and the Lettrist movement, Debord produced a “critique without concessions” (Debord, quoted in Levin 2004, 396) of the role of images in contemporary audiovisual culture. This critique is especially evident in the series of films he directed between 1952 and 1978, “veritable laboratories of *détournement*.” (Levin 2004, 424) The subversion and re-signification of mass culture’s images was not made in the interest of scandal, but with the revolutionary purpose of *double negation* in mind. To Debord, images can prove nothing except the reigning deception of which they are part and parcel. *Images cannot save, nor are they salvageable*. Therefore, they must only be misused, *détourned* (Levin 2004, 407). This is what explains the emphasis on the *disjunctive* in Debord’s films, and why *no alternative* use of the images is ever suggested. Thomas Levin sees a metaphorical configuration of negativity in the image of the pinball machine subjected to successive tilts in the film *Critique de la séparation* (1961). The tilt signals and punishes the limits of *legal participation* of the player, therefore exposing the guiding principles of the game, including the principle of *pseudo-participation*. In the same way, “Debord tilts the spectacle and thereby violently brings to a halt a game marked by non-intervention or separation.” (Levin 2004, 372)⁵⁰

⁴⁹ “It would be better to detourn it as a whole, without necessarily even altering the montage, by adding a soundtrack that made a powerful denunciation of the horrors of imperialist war and of the activities of the Ku Klux Klan, which are continuing in the United States even now.” (Debord and Wolman 1956)

⁵⁰ On Debord’s films, see also E. C. Williams (2013) and Noys (2007).

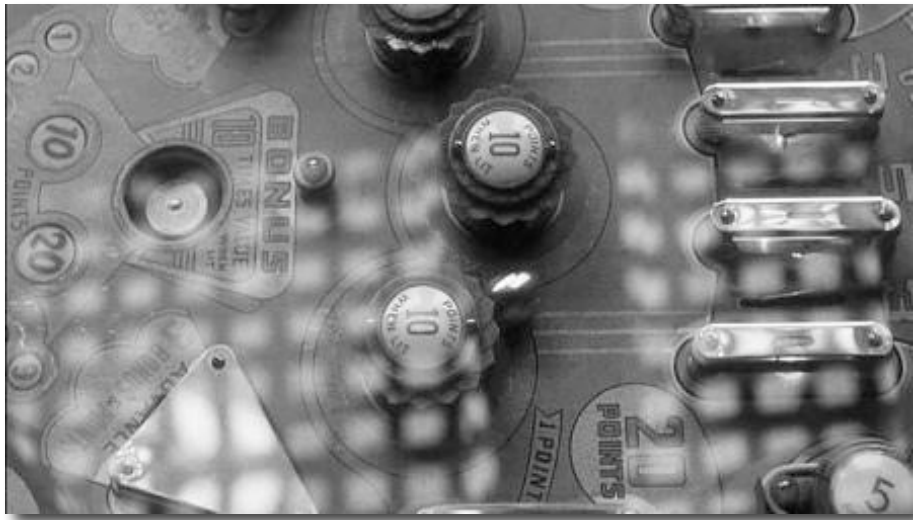


Figure 11: *Critique de la séparation* (Guy Debord, 1961) 5:06

The strategy of *détournement* that Debord's films embody is clearly organized for the benefit of the spectator. It aims to transform the passiveness of cinematic consumption "toward critical engagement" (2004, 347). In this way, the deliberate confusion produced by the radical juxtapositions of *détournement* is intended to refuse the "false and reductive pseudo-coherence of (narrative) spectacle" and, consequently, "the fundamental incoherence of the reality of late capitalism." (2004, 358) Levin describes this strategy of *détournement* as a "mimesis of incoherence," which is presented as such, that is, "in its impenetrable density, [holding] out the possibility of an alternative, not yet accessible meaning." (2004, 360) Debord's cinema is not designed to suggest alternative meanings, but to denounce and thoroughly refuse the structure and function of *all* audiovisual representation. This is why, from Levin's perspective, the dismantling of spectacle achieved through the strategy of *détournement* necessarily involves the dismantling of cinema itself (2004, 428). This does not imply that *détournement's* double negation of mass culture is not without an epistemological potential, but simply that its first and foremost lesson is the *tilting* of the conditions in which representation takes place. Debord's position is not didactic *in spite of* being "rigorously negative" (2004, 370) —it is didactic *because* of its negativity and because of the way it "reverses the (hegemonic) ideological marking of the medium." (2004, 396)

In this way, *détournement* rescues the critical potential of modernist formal operations by utterly rejecting their logic of pseudo-participation whereby the understanding of the conditions of representation of an audiovisual text is an inevitable part of its reception.

Concluding remarks

To suggest that digital culture is characterised by the existence of a homology between the formal operations involved in the production, but also the reception, of an audiovisual text implies two important shifts in perspective.

First, the effectiveness of these operations is displaced from the realm of the producers to that of the spectators through the internalization of the double logic of remediation implicit in these formal operations; digital technologies have greatly enhanced the scope of spectatorship itself, extending the analytical tools once exclusively reserved to artists and filmmakers to digitally mediated audiovisual texts. The epistemological potential of those operations, while remaining valid, does not reside as much in the production of subversive texts as in the subversion of those texts by the everyday acts of their reception. This implies sidestepping of the Adornian-inspired suspicion of the appropriation of (elite) modernist practices by mass culture and a notion of spectatorship as passive consumption, in order to assign to the acts of reception of every audiovisual text a spectatorial activity marked by important epistemological potentials. On the other hand, this displacement demands that we ask: does the epistemological potential of these formal operations remains intact when they are transformed into a mass practice? Does the mass production and the mass digital mediation of contemporary audiovisual texts correspond to a form of *mass textual analysis* by the spectators?

If the modernist homology between the production and reception of audiovisual texts has become internalized in most viewing situations, to study the epistemological potential of modernist formal operations such as montage is key to the understanding of how contemporary audiovisual culture has harnessed that potential in order to create more effective forms of consumption

of audiovisual texts. The formal operations of montage all presuppose an active spectator that, in order to receive the audiovisual text, will reproduce the same formal operations that were used to produce it in the first place. I have argued that the compilation film tradition, in particular, is organised around the self-conscious engagement with these formal operations, which through the recombination of previously existent audiovisual texts make obvious to the spectator the textual nature of all moving images, their multiple temporalities, and their material dimension. But, as I have also argued, the compilation film's mobilization of montage is hardly the equivalent of the critique of the conditions of existence of contemporary audiovisual culture. The Remix, in turn, is the example of a vernacular use of montage that systematically frustrates its critical potential —mobilizing the double logic of remediation towards perfunctory, pseudo-critical activities instead.

By extending to the spectator the formal operations that characterised modernism, digitally mediated culture has exacerbated its ambiguous relation to mass culture. However, instead of underlining a binary choice between its critique *or* appropriation by mass culture, contemporary audiovisual culture has, as it were, better exposed how the two are *folded* together. Having to analyse a text as part of its process of reception is, as far as the spectator is concerned, a form of legal participation, a pseudo-critical activity whose boundaries are defined in advance and which merely enhances an “enlightened” form of consumption. In doing so, the epistemological discoveries offered by montage reveal their important ideological functions: to prevent spectators from understanding and challenging the totality of material relations constitutive of contemporary audiovisual culture.

As the Situationists had already suggested, contemporary audiovisual culture cannot therefore save, nor is it salvageable. To assume the opposite would be to entertain the hypothesis that the epistemological potential of contemporary audiovisual culture holds any true emancipatory value; but, as I have tried to show, such epistemological potential is domesticated into a vernacular, pseudo-critical activity that actively reinforces the status quo. To tap into the emancipatory potential of digitally mediated culture one will need to engage with both textual and spectatorship practices that are less willing to

“learn” about how audiovisual texts work, than to question the ideological purpose and the consequences of this epistemological experience. To unleash its critical potential it will be necessary, then, to *negate* the lessons digital culture has to offer, as much as the conditions in which that knowledge is offered.

These issues are pressingly embodied in the objectives and the methods of the digital audiovisual essay, which can play an exemplary role in the analysis of the productive contradictions and of the ideological functions of digitally mediated culture. The digital audiovisual essay is, like many other cultural practices today, a product of the internalization of the epistemological potential of modernism in everyday engagements with audiovisual texts. However, the audiovisual essay distinguishes itself as the self-conscious, reflexive analysis of the everyday engagements with those texts, and with cinema in particular. It is, in other words, the reflexive exploration of its own the conditions of possibility.

Elaborating on their own experiences, audiovisual essayists illustrate in their own work the more general principle —of which they themselves are not exempted— of how the relation with cinema in contemporary audiovisual culture not only *enables*, but also *requires* the casual spectator to become a textual analyst. Putting the analysis of the aesthetic tensions of the intraface and of the intricacies of the double logic of remediation at the centre of its investigation and of its formal strategies, the audiovisual essay will therefore be a consequence of these processes as much as an analytical tool able to provide valuable insights into them. In this way, the audiovisual essay can be seen to embody the tensions between critique and consumerism that characterize the internalization of the epistemological potential of modernism. In its worst examples, it will be a pseudo-critical activity that contributes to incrementing the consumption of audiovisual texts. However, at its best, it will illuminate the interdependency of critical and consumerist activities, and even point at ways to circumvent and short-circuit them.

3. Four examples

Extending the long history of the tensions of modernism, the audiovisual essay mobilizes editing and other formal strategies that make its spectators aware of the material and semiotic qualities of the films it recombines, as well as of the acts of technological mediation that made possible not only digital essaying, but also the viewing experiences that characterise digitally mediated audiovisual culture. A text that endlessly feeds on the ever-increasing flood of moving images and sounds, the audiovisual essay is both cause and effect, condition and consequence of the internalization of remediation in digitally mediated culture. The audiovisual essay can thus illustrate digitally mediated culture's ideological functions of restricting the understanding of moving images to the possibility of their fragmentation and manipulation —that is, the knowing refusal (disavowal) of the totality in which the conditions of production, circulation and reception of the moving images are formed; as well as the inoculation of spectators against effective forms of critical reception of contemporary audiovisual texts. However, were the digital audiovisual essay to unleash its full critical potential, it might conceivably short-circuit contemporary audiovisual culture. Some essayists have already indicated this possibility and have started to map out, either in their essays or in their written companion pieces, the methods and the functions the audiovisual essay must aim for if it is to outrun audiovisual consumerism's long tail.

A relevant choice of examples of the contemporary practice of the digital audiovisual essay is, however, far from obvious. Digital audiovisual essays are so diverse that one could justifiably argue that there are as many different methods and rhetorical strategies as there are different essayists. Furthermore, although they sometimes display a dogged interest in a specific recurrent subject and consistently using a particular technique, it is also not uncommon for audiovisual essayists to dramatically vary their style from one essay to the next. It would seem, in fact, that the methodological variety and the permanent

experimentation that characterises the form are widely reproduced inside each other's body of work —when not within a *single* audiovisual essay. In this chapter, I chose to focus on the work of four audiovisual essayists: David Bordwell, Catherine Grant, ::kogonada, and Kevin B. Lee. I have chosen these essayists because I believe their work aptly illustrates the field's diversity, the five features described in chapter 1, and more importantly, the tensions defining the practice and reception of this form and its ambiguous relation to mass culture that I have detailed in chapter 2 —in short, the work of these essayists is appropriate to illustrate all the elements that make the digital audiovisual essay such an exemplary text of digitally mediated culture.

The four examples are extremely useful to understand how the five key defining tensions of the audiovisual essay occur cumulatively and in different degrees in the work of the same essayist. Although their mobilization of the epistemological potential of editing and the use of other compositional strategies yields very different results, the work of these essayists establishes personal cinephilia and digital spectatorship as the object of the digital audiovisual essay. Their use of the affordances of digital editing technologies also exemplifies the wide spectrum of rhetorical strategies employed by the digital audiovisual essay: more creative in the case of Grant and ::kogonada, and much more analytical in the case of Bordwell and Lee. Their essays are representative, also in varying degrees, of the specificities of the audiovisual essay as a 'native' Web 2.0 cultural practice that stimulates collaborative forms of production and dialogical modes of reception. Finally, their combination of verbal and audiovisual elements of communication is also illustrative of the different ways in which audiovisual essayists are willing (or not) to experiment with alternatives to the traditional voice-over commentary to convey their arguments.

The editing and compositional techniques used by these essayists—sequential editing, the simultaneous split- and multiple-screen comparison, palimpsest-like superimpositions, the combination of verbal and audiovisual elements, the use of popular cultural forms such as the 'supercut' or television advertising, motion alterations, freeze frames, or the use of the "desktop cinema" method—, all more or less explicitly embody the double logic of remediation and are therefore absolutely key to a detailed understanding of how the

epistemological potential of the digital audiovisual essays works. As we shall see, these techniques require from the spectator of the digital audiovisual essay an active, perceptually charged mode of viewing which can potentially teach important lessons not only about the textual and material qualities of individual moving images, but also about the technological acts of mediation and the subject formations that characterise digitally mediated audiovisual culture.

Although each essayist's work will be analysed individually, the chapter establishes some affinities between them. Bordwell and Grant's work will be used to investigate the scholarly configuration of the audiovisual essay; and the discussion of ::kogonada and Lee's videos will yield some insights into the film critic and cinephile contexts in which the audiovisual essay is also practiced. In the first pair of case studies, centred around academic publication and discussion contexts, the practice of the digital essay will be shown to range from the promotion of the scholar's *previously existing written work* (Bordwell) to the tendential exploration of audiovisual research methods that use *digital* viewing and editing technologies to produce *new work* (Grant). In this regard, Bordwell and Grant's essays are very pertinent to the discussion of the role played by methodological instability and autonomy in relation to academic written work as sources of resistance to the institutional acceptance of the audiovisual essay as a legitimate research tool. Bordwell's work is important to assess the foundational role of the academic lecture and conference presentation formats (and the specific affordances of the PowerPoint software to simultaneously compare words and images taken from different films: a prefiguration of the *split-screen* device) in the early development of the audiovisual essay. Grant's essays, on the other hand, are central to understand how, even in the academic context, the audiovisual essay can be militantly defended as an alternative, but equally valid research method that combines creative and analytical purposes, thus serving as a reminder of the important similarities that have always existed between cinephilia and textual analysis. Her essays are marked by continuous methodological experimentation and the progressive use of digital editing and compositional techniques as an alternative to the voice-over commentary. Grant's essays tested many different forms of relating the written word, sounds, and images for comparative purposes and to investigate the intertextual

relations shaping specific audiovisual texts. She moved from sequential editing strategies to multiple-screen comparisons, and recently started testing superimpositions as a way to literally inscribe in an image its network of intertextual relations. Finally, Grant used the audiovisual essay to address important cinephiliac experiences, using digital editing to allow specific films and biographical memories to mutually illuminate each other.

Bordwell and Grant focus on the semiotic qualities of the audiovisual texts they analyse, to the detriment of their material qualities as mass produced and circulated audiovisual commodities. In other words, Bordwell and Grant do firmly establish the epistemological potential of montage as a key affordance of digital viewing and editing technologies, and they effectively elect, for that purpose, the fragmentation and recombination of previously existing audiovisual texts as the key formal strategies of their essays. This will allow them to engage in a form of material, audiovisual thinking, and to productively not only come to terms with their own spectatorial experiences, such as they are shaped by digitally mediated culture, but also share those experiences with the spectators of their own essays, an action with rich pedagogical and scholarly consequences. In spite of illustrating their findings about specific films and cinephile experiences, their essays will not, however, question the role of the audiovisual essay in the broader context of digitally mediated culture; and they will not specifically address the ideological functions of the double logic of remediation in the context of digitally mediated audiovisual culture.

The ideological functions the digital audiovisual essay will guide my discussion of the other two essayists, ::kogonada and Kevin B. Lee. Their work is representative of the widespread use of the audiovisual essay beyond the academic context, and of its important ramifications in both the cinephile and the film critic contexts. As such, these essayists' work is especially relevant to demonstrate how the epistemological potentials of montage have been internalized by digitally mediated culture and why the digital audiovisual essay is its most exemplary text: at once the product and the agent of dissemination of digitally mediated culture, and taking its force from the dialectical tension between its critique and consumerism drives. This is not to say that ::kogonada and Lee are equally aware of the tensions involved in the practice of the digital

audiovisual essay, the ideological functions of the double logic of remediation, or of the critical potentials associated with their specific uses of editing. In fact, their respective understanding and practice of the audiovisual essay, and the relation to digitally mediated culture thereof derived, could hardly be more opposed. While ::kogonada illustrates a familiarity with popular culture and a domesticated, *vernacular* practice of editing that utterly neutralises its critical potential, Lee will strive to turn the double logic of remediation against itself, aiming to the sheer negation of the conditions of existence of contemporary audiovisual culture. In short, while ::kogonada will use the audiovisual essay to celebrate and express complicity with digitally mediated culture, Lee will use it to express distrust, discontentment, and refusal of the ideological functions that the practice of the audiovisual essay was supposed to help enforce.

My choices are not intended to either establish a canon, or to put forward a normative view of this cultural practice. This will hopefully be avoided by means of the rhetorical strategy of reading pairs of essayists side by side, and indeed *against* each other, thus emphasizing the methodological openness of the form and, more importantly, consolidating my core argument about the ambiguities of the audiovisual essay in its relation to mass culture and critical thought. This contrapuntal strategy will reach its apex in my discussion of the work of Kevin B. Lee, not only a personal favourite, but also a key author when it comes to bringing to the fore the acute tensions that traverse the practices and functions of the digital audiovisual essay. The greater attention dedicated to his work is justified because his essays offer the clearest example of the five key defining tensions of the audiovisual essay, and his editing and compositional strategies embody a quite literal and explicit illustration of the double logic of remediation: a method Lee described as the “desktop cinema.” While this method is especially equipped to offer critical insights into contemporary audiovisual culture, Lee will use it instead to lay bare the double logic of remediation at work in the digital audiovisual essay, and to force it to “articulat[e] discontent with its own place in the world.” (Lee 2013a) Deeply influenced by Harun Farocki’s work, Lee suggests that the audiovisual essay should go beyond its obvious pedagogical role:

“Every image has its own subliminal instruction manual that tells us how we should look at it and feel about it. So maybe what’s needed is a *counter-instruction manual* that helps us to decode those instructions, so that we might learn how not to follow them. That way, maybe we might see something else than what the image wants us to see: a reality that’s deeper than images.” (Lee 2014g)

As we shall see, Lee’s method is not unlike the situationist negation of the role assigned to images in the context of mass culture. In order to decode and counter that role, Lee will use the “desktop cinema” to turn the audiovisual essay upside down, hence exposing the ideological functions that govern it, as well as digitally mediated culture as a whole —thus hopefully inviting the beginning of their downfall.

3.1. David Bordwell: the absent lecturer

Although David Bordwell has never used the term “audiovisual essay” and his work has rarely been cited or curated in this context, I would argue that the term appropriately describes his involvement in the production of “video lectures,” “video examples,” DVD commentaries and documentary extras, or the occasional “video essay.” To begin this chapter with Bordwell and this list of apparent audiovisual oddities is not, however, to suggest that he might have pioneered the audiovisual essay. It is, instead, a way to start my discussion of individual essayists by acknowledging the role this cultural practice has played in academia at a moment when scholars are hard pressed to reach beyond their traditional audiences. It is also, and perhaps more importantly, to mark the foundational status of the classroom and the conference auditorium in the development of the audiovisual essay, a point that I believe has been insufficiently addressed so far.

Video lectures

The academic lecture and the conference presentation are an important “template” (Lavik 2012b) for the audiovisual essay. Lectures and presentations

“typically combine the spoken word, moving and still images, and text in the form of bullet points or quotations,” (Lavik 2012b) all of which can be found in the audiovisual essay as well. David Bordwell’s use of the digital audiovisual essay seems to be a good illustration of this. *How Motion Pictures Became the Movies* (2012) and *CinemaScope: The Modern Miracle you See Without Glasses* (2013) were published on Bordwell and Kristin Thompson’s blog, *Observations on Film Art*, as video versions of lectures that were withdrawn from public presentation. Both videos were uploaded to Bordwell’s Vimeo channel⁵¹ and embedded in separate blog posts (2013b; 2013c). *How motion pictures...* is also available on an autonomous page in David Bordwell’s website, where it is accompanied by a bibliography and a filmography⁵². The structure of both video lectures is similar. Both have a much longer duration than is customary in digital audiovisual essays: *How motion pictures...* is 69 minutes long; *CinemaScope...*, 52 minutes. Both are video records of a PowerPoint slide presentation and therefore combine text and fixed images, mostly movie stills, but also posters, photos, scanned historical documents, and diagrams, to which Bordwell’s voice-over commentary is added. Although there is no technical limitation that would preclude it, neither of these videos makes use of movie extracts.

As Bordwell explains, even if the videos are not the recordings of live lectures, they nevertheless seem able to convey some sense of liveness:

“The lecture isn’t a record of me pacing around talking. Rather, it’s a PowerPoint presentation that runs as a video, with my scratchy voice-over. I didn’t write a text, but rather talked it through as if I were presenting it live. It nakedly exposes my mannerisms and bad habits, but I hope they don’t get in the way of your enjoyment.” (Bordwell 2013b)

Bordwell’s use of long pauses to underline the end of a section or to emphasise a conclusion, or the “Thank you for your attention” that closes both video lectures, are all reminiscent of the rhetorical strategies that characterize the “live” —that is, presented before a physical audience— lecture. On the other hand, other elements seem to underline the *recorded* character of the video

⁵¹ <https://vimeo.com/user14337401>

⁵² <http://davidbordwell.net/video/movielecture.php>

lecture: button-clicking sounds (to advance the slides), sheets of paper being flipped over (to read the lecture notes), and subtle volume differences that signal different audio takes. The video lecture might not have been recorded in front of a physical audience, but as these traces prove, it is still very much a *recorded performance* of the lecturer's rhetorical and argumentative skills.

Erlend Lavik was certainly right when he defined the genre as one "over which the presenter has full control":

"Delays, distractions, technical hiccups, digressions, nervousness, false starts, and lapses of memory can all be eliminated. Rather, the video essayist can fine-tune every detail of the presentation in order to present an argument with maximum precision and clarity." (Lavik 2012b)

The "full control" concerns not only the audiovisual aspects of the video lecture (editing, framing, etc.), but also —and perhaps more decisively—the elements of the *recorded performance* of the lecturer, that is, his use of the PowerPoint slide show. The video lecture, much like its live counterpart, allows its author to control the pace of the slide change, how much time is spent on each slide, how pauses in the verbal commentary are used, not to mention how text, still images and diagrams are combined, either inside individual slides or sequentially across the presentation. Since these elements can be found in so many contemporary audiovisual essays, one must ask if the PowerPoint presentation software could have had some influence in the development of the genre. Thus, the video lecture —at least as Bordwell uses it— could be seen not as a *poor* form of the digital essay (dependent on a PowerPoint slide shot and without movie extracts), but rather as a *transitional* form that elucidates not only the audiovisual essay's general filiation in the academic lecture and conference presentation formats, but more specifically in the use of the PowerPoint presentation software to organise and combine words and images. To be clear, I am not suggesting that David Bordwell has pioneered any particular aspect of the audiovisual essay, but merely that his video lectures usefully demonstrate what the audiovisual essay has inherited from the conference and classroom PowerPoint presentation. On the one hand, there is the generic co-existence of text and images, as well as some typographic experimentation. On the other

hand, and perhaps more importantly, the PowerPoint software offers a mode of presentation based on establishing *verifiable comparisons*, either *sequentially*, across slides, or *simultaneously*, through the combination of different images in the same slide.

In the first case, Bordwell's video lectures excel in the *sequential* use of still images for the purpose of scene analysis, a common practice both in the classroom and conference contexts, when the use of movie extracts was still technically demanding, or time constraints advised against the use of moving images. In his later audiovisual essays, Bordwell would combine the use of sequences of movie stills with a movie extract of the same scene. This strategy is employed in *Constructive Editing: Pickpocket (1959) Robert Bresson* (2012, 12min), but is the exclusive rhetorical strategy of *Elliptical Editing: Vagabond (1985) Agnès Varda* (with Kristin Thompson, 2012, 4min). Here, a scene from Agnès Varda's *Vagabond* (1985) is first showed in a series of stills with an introductory voice-over commentary, then as a movie extract with the original sound track, and finally, once again as a selection of stills from the same scene to underline the commentator's conclusions.

Apart from these editing strategies that combine still and moving images, Bordwell's video lectures take advantage of another PowerPoint mode of organising visual information that would become a cornerstone of the digital audiovisual essay: the split-screen. In his video lectures, movie stills (or other images) are often displayed in a *side-by-side comparison* that makes use of PowerPoint's software slide pre-set configuration "Two content/Comparison". This allows him to establish connections between two different movies, which the voice-over then clarifies or emphasises. The audiovisual essay will employ the split-screen technique to contrast movie extracts in much the same way. To many audiovisual essayists, this widespread technique would come to epitomise the form's advantage over traditional film analysis. Instead of getting lost in a sequential, written analysis, an argument about the similarities or differences between two scenes could now be made by literally *juxtaposing* the two scenes. In *Mildred Pierce: Murder Twice Over* (2013, 6min), for example, Bordwell uses the split-screen to compare the movie's initial scene with its replay towards the

end of the film (or rather, to an alternative editing that combines the shots of the initial scene and its replay).

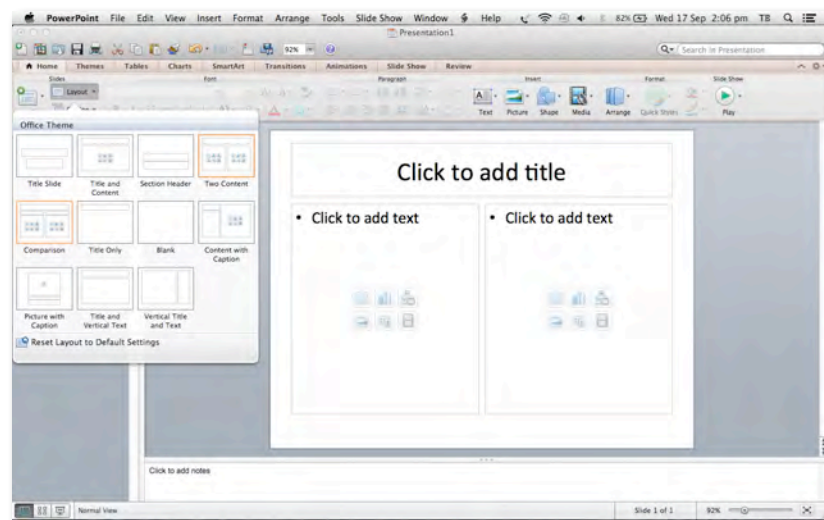


Figure 12: PowerPoint's pre-set configuration "Two Content/Comparison"



Figure 13: *How Motion Pictures Became the Movies* (David Bordwell, 2012)

The split-screen is an obvious instance of the double logic of remediation that so many digital essayists will explore. This device not only works on a representational level (communicating the original semiotic content of the reproduced images), but it also conveys new meanings that arise from the simultaneous presentation of different images. In doing so, the split-screen necessarily draws attention to itself and, accordingly, to the audiovisual essay as

it mediates the emergence of new semiotic relations. Furthermore, the split-screen signals the relational nature of montage and the spatialization of editing inherent to digital viewing and editing technologies, which would become, as we shall see, the cornerstone of so many audiovisual essays. Bordwell does not, however, explore the affordances of the split-screen in any systematic, let alone reflexive way. The reason for this is that Bordwell is not interested in using the audiovisual essay as an autonomous research method.

In the blog post that accompanied the original publication of *Mildred Pierce...*, Bordwell (2013d) explained that he had already written about the use of the replay (and its difference in relation to the flashback) in *Mildred Pierce* (1945) in 1992. A revised version of the article was included in *Poetics of Cinema* (Bordwell 2007), and was made available online on Bordwell's website⁵³ on the occasion of the audiovisual essay's publication. To Bordwell, the audiovisual essay allowed him to do "something [he] couldn't do in print. The wonders of the Internet let [him] use video extracts to show concretely how clever this replay is." (Bordwell 2013d) *Mildred Pierce ...* is hardly an exception in Bordwell's work. His use of the audiovisual essay and the video lecture consistently illustrates previously published articles and books. The video lecture *How Motion Pictures...* ends by encouraging the viewer to visit David Bordwell's website and blog for more information on those subjects. The *CinemaScope...* lecture, on the other hand, encourages its viewer to learn more about wide formats in another chapter of Bordwell's 2007 book, *Poetics of Cinema*, available online on his blog, and on which the lecture draws heavily for structure, examples, and even for many of the slide/shot layouts.

In spite of Bordwell's suggestion that we "[t]hink of the [video] lecture as the DVD and the [book] chapter as the accompanying booklet" (Bordwell 2013c), a strong hierarchy between the two elements emerges out of their uses and described functions. The written pieces always seem to take precedence over the audiovisual ones, not only in chronological terms, but also in the sense that they are seen as the more developed, "master" version of the arguments. Bordwell alluded to this *shorthand* quality of his audiovisual works when he stated, apropos the *Mildred Pierce...* video, that "[p]erhaps what I do here will *tease* you

⁵³ <http://www.davidbordwell.net/books/poetics.php>

[the viewer] into reading the more technical essay [i.e., the corresponding chapter in *Poetics of Cinema*]" (Bordwell 2013d). While he may praise its qualities, David Bordwell uses the audiovisual essay (as well as the video lecture) as a *teaser* whose purpose is to entice the viewers into reading the scholar's previously published, written work. Bordwell's audiovisual work can, then, be inscribed in his (and Kristin Thompson's) "para-academic" film writing experiments, that is, "a way of getting ideas, information, and opinions out to a film-enthusiast readership whom we hadn't reached with our earlier work" (Bordwell 2012b). These experiences started with the website and blog, on which article-length posts are periodically published (always illustrated with movie stills), extended to the online publication of out-of-print books, the publication of print books and e-books made entirely of blog entries, and even an e-book with embedded movie extracts (Bordwell 2013e)⁵⁴. The production of video lectures, audiovisual essays and supplements to the textbook *Film Art: An Introduction* is only the most recent example of these para-academic experiments, which must, like its predecessors, be understood as yet another extension of the reach of the author's print or online *written* publications. This is in stark opposition, as we shall see, with, for example, Catherine Grant's mode of presentation of her audiovisual essays, co-existing in non-hierarchical fashion with written texts.

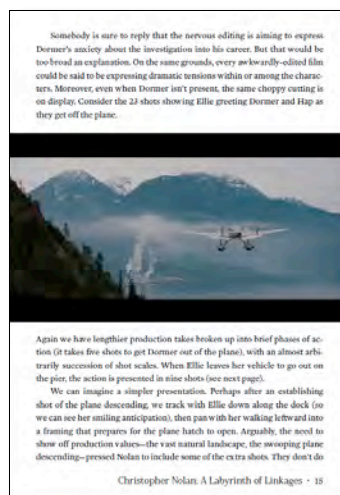


Figure 14: Page of Bordwell and Thompson's book *Christopher Nolan: A Labyrinth of Linkages* (2013) with an embedded movie extract

⁵⁴ The authors are referring to *Exporting Entertainment* (Thompson 1985) and *Ozu* (Bordwell 1988), *Minding Movies* (Bordwell 2011) and *Pandora's Digital Box* (Bordwell 2013a), and *Christopher Nolan* (Bordwell and Thompson 2013), respectively.

Video examples

Although the audiovisual essays that supplement Bordwell and Thompson's *Film Art* could hardly be considered *teasers* for their textbook, they are nonetheless a good example of the form's subaltern role in relation to the authors' previously published work. In 2012, on the occasion of the tenth edition of *Film Art*, Bordwell and Thompson created, with the help of Erik Gunneson (filmmaker and Faculty Associate at the University of Wisconsin-Madison), a series of twenty videos tackling a series of concepts and specific sequence analyses in their textbook. Bordwell and Thompson wrote the scripts and recorded the voice-overs, and Gunneson produced the videos. The use of moving images was seen as the "next logical step" (Bordwell 2012a) after the book's extensive and pioneer use of frame enlargements. To the authors, "it [was] as if the sort of examples we use in *Film Art* ha[d] sprung to life." (Bordwell 2012a)

The videos are organized according to the book's chapter structure and re-enact, as it were, the written sequence analyses⁵⁵. The authors make use of several formal strategies: they play original movie clips, they repeat those clips as a series of stills, they add voice-over commentaries, they use overhead diagrams or superimpose graphic elements to the image. Pertaining to the chapter "Mise-en-scène," *Available Lighting in Breathless (1960)* "starts with an extract from an interview with cinematographer Raoul Coutard," which is then "followed by an illustrative clip." Taken from the "Cinematography" chapter, *Tracking Shots Structure a Scene in Ugetsu (1953)*, on the other hand, uses a "split-screen technique, [to] lay out the shots and show how camera movements are used to add to the ominous, poignant effect of the scene." The "Editing" chapter prompted, among others, *Editing with Graphic Matches in Seven Samurai (1954)*, which "shows the scene in its context and then replays the series of matches, freezing and laying them out across the screen"; *Shifting the Axis of Action in Shaun of the Dead (2004)*, which employs "stills and overhead diagrams to show how the axis of action can be shifted when characters turn

⁵⁵ More recently, the second edition of *Film Theory: An Introduction Through the Senses*, by Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener (2010), was followed by the creation of a companion website listing a selection of pre-existing audiovisual essays considered relevant for each chapter of the book. See, <http://www.routledgetextbooks.com/textbooks/9781138824300/default.php>.

their heads and when new characters join the conversation”; or *Crosscutting in M (1930)*, which plays a “first run-through [of the scene] and then a replay with freeze-frames” (Bordwell 2012a; see this reference for the complete list of videos).

These videos are accompanied by “three original demonstration videos laying out basics of lighting, camera lens length and movement, and continuity editing” and the short documentary *What Comes Out Must Go in: 2D Computer Animation* that addresses issues discussed in the book’s chapter about Animation. All the videos are available online at *Connect*, an educational platform created by McGraw-Hill, the textbook’s publisher⁵⁶. The videos are part of a larger set of pedagogical resources and student assignments directly inspired by the book. Their use is, however, password-protected and restricted to the students whose universities have purchased this service. The aforementioned video *Elliptical Editing: Vagabond (1985) Agnès Varda (2012)* is the only one freely available online, as a sample. *Constructive Editing: Pickpocket (1959) Robert Bresson (2012)*, also available online, was made after the Connect videos started being used. It was intended for teachers and students not using *Film Art* and it is, therefore, a “longer, more wide-ranging piece, also suitable for classrooms.” (Bordwell 2012c) Although this video still cross-references the textbook, its greater autonomy from *Film Art*, and especially the Connect context, made the inclusion of more contextual information necessary. This is perhaps the reason why, for the first time, Bordwell used the expression “video essay” to describe his audiovisual work (Bordwell 2012c).

More than twice as long as *Elliptical Editing...*, *Constructive Editing...* includes a long introductory sequence that uses stills from a number of films, from different genres and historical periods, to define, first, the notion of analytical editing, and only afterward the contrasting notion of constructive editing. This introduction uses voice-over commentary and stills for the purpose of scene dissection: the opening sequence of *The Maltese Falcon* (John Huston, 1941) is used as an example of analytical editing (and is cross-referenced to the written analysis on *Film Art*’s chapter 6). The same technique is used in a

⁵⁶ <http://connect.customer.mheducation.com/products/connect-for-bordwell-film-art-an-introduction-10e/>

contrafactual manner to suggest how the notion of constructive editing is based upon the absence of establishing shots. Bordwell reproduces a scene from *The Ghost Writer* (Roman Polanski, 2010) using a series of stills, and then repeats the scene without the stills from the establishing shots. Only after making a reference to a group of soviet films from the 1920s that experimented with this concept does Bordwell introduce Robert Bresson and the scene from *Pickpocket* that he is going to analyse. From here on, *Constructive Editing...*'s structure (and indeed its duration) is very similar to Connect's *Elliptical Editing...*. After some introductory remarks about the filmmaker and a condensed version of *Pickpocket*'s plot, commented over a sequence of photos of Bresson and some of his films, a 60 second movie extract is played —Michel (Martin LaSalle) nicks a man's wristwatch in a crosswalk. In the remaining four minutes, Bordwell comments on how Bresson's use of close shots and constructive editing conveys tension and Michel's mastery of pickpocketing. Bordwell uses stills from the movie extract to comment on particular aspects of this interpretation, and briefly uses a split-screen to establish an eyeline match between two shots, and hence, once more, the absence of any kind of establishing shot.



Figure 15: Two stills from *The End of Saint Petersburg* (Vsevolod Pudovkin and Mikhail Doller) in *Constructive Editing...* (David Bordwell, 2012)



Figure 16: Two stills from *Pickpocket* (Robert Bresson, 1959)
in *Constructive Editing...* (David Bordwell, 2012)

Like the Connect videos, *Constructive Editing...* is only possible because Bordwell and McGraw-Hill's partnership with The Criterion Collection allows them to sort out any copyright issues. All these videos make use of movies previously edited in DVD or Blu-Ray by Criterion (Bordwell 2012a). Of course, a partnership of this kind is not necessary for the production and distribution of digital audiovisual essays. Most essayists in the US (or using US-copyrighted material) have procured movie extracts under the Digital Millennium Copyright Act or extended interpretations of Fair Use provisions⁵⁷. Still, vigilant copyright holders and their representatives might prevent the distribution of these videos—such was the case when YouTube temporarily suspended Kevin B. Lee's account (Lee 2009)—, or inhibit essayists from circulating them widely—as was the case when Tag Gallagher recently asked that public links to some of his essays be removed from several blogs. Bordwell's partnership seems therefore not only warranted, but indispensable considering that the videos, may well have an educational purpose, but also are available in a paid access context.

⁵⁷ On copyright issues in relation to digital audiovisual essaying, see Anderson (2012) and Lavik (2012b).

The partnership with Criterion is also, of course, a form of brand promotion. The Connect videos not only advertise Criterion's catalogue but also contribute to the company's cultural distinction as the distributor of auteur cinema "classics" that integrate university syllabi. Criterion has also started to commission "video essays" to be included as extras to their DVD and Blu-Ray editions, a strategy that proves as prestigious to the company as to the selected essayists themselves, regardless of the degree of formal inventiveness of that work.⁵⁸ While the Connect videos promote Criterion and their pantheon of "movie classics," they also promote Bordwell as a scholar and a pedagogue, as well as his formalist method of film analysis. Even if he is physically absent, Bordwell is able to extend his presence and his film analyses to a number of students and other interested readers or viewers.

To recapitulate, both the video lectures and the Connect videos are reminiscent of the conference and classroom contexts, where the same formal strategies mobilize the written and the spoken word, still and moving images, for the purpose of film analysis. In all his videos, Bordwell seems to embrace the interpellation of the viewer that we hear at the beginning of *Constructive Editing's* audio commentary: "You're the filmmaker." That is, the viewer is led, by the scholar's film analysis, towards a process that denaturalizes the moving image and shows it to be the result of a series of formal choices made by the filmmaker. However, and as we have also seen, these analyses all had an anterior existence, published in written form. Bordwell's video essays have no desire to replace or even extend the conclusions of their written counterparts. They are *reminders* of those analyses, always cross-referencing them and pointing towards their greater completeness, inviting the viewers to read them. They could not be further, then, from the "happy stage" of filmic analysis, which is carried out collaboratively within a classroom and its outcome is left undecided. The audiovisual essay is, here, practiced as a mnemonic technique of a research process that has *already taken place* and that has already been closed and fixed

⁵⁸ Tag Gallagher is the author of several "DVD analyses"; and David Bordwell has recently seen one of his "video essays" included in Criterion's edition of *Master of the House* (Carl Th. Dreyer, 1925). While these authors' work may be inscribed in the tradition of the DVD extra documentary, that is certainly not the case, for example, of ::kagonada's recent *The Eye and the Beholder* in Criterion's edition of *La Dolce Vita* (Federico Fellini, 1960).

in a written form. In spite of touching on the possibility of using *images to comment images*, using techniques —such as the split-screen, the freeze frame, and repetition— that could potentially explore the double logic of remediation inherent to the digital audiovisual essay, and therefore enact the moment of filmic analysis as an open process with unpredictable results, Bordwell paradoxically uses it to distance the viewer from that moment and that process. For a practice of the audiovisual essay in the academic context that embraces the processual and undecided nature of filmic analysis, we must now turn to Catherine Grant.

3.2. Catherine Grant: continuous experimentation

While David Bordwell uses the digital audiovisual essay as a pedagogical tool to promote previously existing written work and to extend his work as a teacher, Catherine Grant uses it as a research tool to advance new and original scholarly analysis. In fact, Grant is not only an influential and prolific essayist, who has produced dozens of videos, but she is also a theoriser and an advocate of the form within the academic world. She has championed the validity and the advantages of this audiovisual research form in academic articles and conferences, in the posts accompanying her own essays (in the blog *Filmanalytical*⁵⁹), and she is the co-founder of the first peer-reviewed journal that exclusively publishes audiovisual essays (*[In]Transition*⁶⁰). She has also curated the online work of numerous audiovisual essayists (in *Film Studies for Free* and *Audiovisualcy*⁶¹), hence emphasizing the importance and the diversity of digital audiovisual studies.

⁵⁹ <http://filmanalytical.blogspot.co.uk/>

⁶⁰ <http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/intransition/>

⁶¹ <http://filmstudiesforfree.blogspot.com/>; <https://vimeo.com/groups/audiovisualcy/>

A performative method

Grant's work has contributed to the academic recognition of the audiovisual essay and to its progressive institutionalization, but her practice and advocacy of the form steers clear from suggesting a single, replicable method. On the contrary, her work is best defined by methodological instability and continuous experimentation. Her "videographic experimentations" span across a "very healthy spectrum" (Grant 2012) of techniques and expressive possibilities, engaging both with the explanatory *and* the poetic modes of the audiovisual essay identified by Christian Keathley (2011). Even if digital tools have provided audiovisual essayists with new forms of criticism and analysis, Keathley argues that this "is rendered primarily in the explanatory mode, offering interpretation, analysis, explication" (Keathley 2011, 179). Grounded primarily in verbal-based forms of communication, the explanatory mode reduces the films under analysis to "objects of study that the guiding critical language will illuminate." (Keathley 2011, 179) However, when those same digital editing tools are used to organise a tendentially *audiovisual* discourse, essayists are able to experiment with a "mode of 'writing' that supplements analysis and explanation with a more expressive, poetical discourse." (Keathley 2011, 179)

Grant's audiovisual essays have somewhat confounded this distinction, using verbal-communication elements in expressive ways (i.e., her use of typography and text citations), and poetic, audiovisual elements for highly reflexive, critical purposes (such as her employment of the multiple-screen, or superimposition effects). Her videos have, as she puts it, a "creative critical" quality (Grant 2014e) because they *challenge* and *merge*, rather than simply apply and combine, the explanatory and the poetic modes. In this way, the continuous methodological experimentation that characterizes Grant's audiovisual work always reveals something about the methods themselves, and not just about the films under analysis. A detail always seems to lead to another detail, a film to another film, an analytical technique to another technique, and an essay to another essay. Continuous methodological experimentation becomes

the norm in audiovisual essaying, an unending process where as much can be learnt from its successes as from its failures.

Creative critical audiovisual essay practices are therefore *performative* in a double sense. While they involve the aforementioned methodological instability and a posture of continuous experimentation on the part of the essayist, audiovisual essays are also performative in a more literal way. As Grant explains, “they use the object themselves. They use reframing techniques, remixing techniques, applied to film and moving image excerpts.” (Grant 2014e) Digital audiovisual essaying implies a close proximity with the analysed film object, and indeed its almost literal manipulation. This is made possible, of course, by the digital viewing and editing technologies that allow this type of intervention, hence distinguishing the contemporary audiovisual essay from its filmic and electronic counterparts.

In her assessment of *Unsentimental education: On Claude Chabrol's Les Bonnes Femmes* (2009, 13min), one of her earliest audiovisual essays, Grant underlines how the form's potential to generate knowledge depends on the continuous manipulation of (a digital version of) Claude Chabrol's *Les Bonnes Femmes* (1960):

“But, regardless of its shortcomings as a finished essay, it was the practical experience of having to work through, construct, and then convey or perform a meaningful analysis by re-editing the film for its making that completely convinced me of the merits of videographic approaches as analytical, pedagogical, and creative research processes. The more I allowed myself to respond freely to the material as I was experiencing it through the audiovisual, spatiotemporal affordances of my editing programme with ‘a gestural use of editing’, the more new knowledge about the film I seemed to produce.” (Grant 2014a, 53; quoting Basilico 2004)

Digital manipulation allows video essays to become “an especially ‘superficial’ form of criticism.” (Grant 2011) This is true in the sense that the material aspect of the (digital) image is often underscored, “frequently using slow motion or zoom-in effects to allow those experiencing them to close in on the grain or detail of the film image” (Grant 2011) —something that is often also

the unintended result of the video compression required by editing software. But also, and now from a *haptic* perspective, digital manipulation often resists dislodging meaning from the surface of the film. In this way, digital manipulation enables a form of *haptic criticism*, which takes place

“when the words *don't* lift off the surface of the film object, if they (or any of the other film-analytical elements conveyed through montage or other non-linear editing techniques and tools) *remain* on the surface of the film object.” (Grant 2011)

In other words, the *superficiality* of digital audiovisual essays means that their meaning remains undecided. The process of digital manipulation opens, rather than closes the meaning of the analysed film(s). Grant's videos are especially “superficial” in the sense that they resist detaching a single, fixed, closed meaning from the manipulated moving images. Furthermore, her accompanying notes and articles also refuse to over-interpret her video work, often pointing instead to what has been learned from the use of a particular technique or combination of techniques. (This is not to say that the videos, or the articles, are devoid of revelations about the films they analyse, on the contrary.)

As Grant also noted, digital manipulation is not limited to editing strategies, but also to *viewing operations*. The direct manipulation of digitized versions of the analysed films retraces and re-enacts the essayists' viewing experiences. In fact, the manipulation of the digital version of the analysed film underscores the *similarity between the viewing and the editing operations*. For Grant, the impression of *touching the film object* depends “on an active handling of it, one that involved eye/ear-hand-touch pad-virtual object/screen coordination and interaction, similar to the DVD-handling conjunction of eye-hand-remote control-virtual object/screen.” (Grant 2014a, 53) Exploring the homology between the production *and* reception of digitally mediated texts, Grant's digital essaying practices consciously enact the epistemological potential of montage, such as it has been internalized by everyday viewing situations.

Digital editing and viewing technologies are, therefore, not only the tool of contemporary audiovisual essays, but also its *object*. The digital version of the analysed film is the necessary *condition* for its further digital manipulation by the

audiovisual essayist. However, as this manipulation shows, the digital moving image is also the original *site* of the spectatorial experiences pursued by the essayist. The digital audiovisual essay enables a “re-imerision in the film experience” (Grant 2011) through which those viewing experiences can be re-enacted and explored, and new ones can take shape. The production of the audiovisual essay transforms the essayist into a self-conscious spectator of his own viewing experiences. The *superficiality* of the essay, on the other hand, allows the spectators of the audiovisual essay to *share* those experiences, thus becoming more self-aware of their *own* viewing experiences. In this light, the digital audiovisual essay seems the fulfilment of Mulvey’s intuition that the affordances of digital viewing technologies “should bring about a ‘reinvention’ of textual analysis *and* a new wave of cinephilia.” (Mulvey 2006, 160; my emphasis) If one takes the example of Grant’s work (and other essayists), the contemporary audiovisual essay does indeed seem to summon the *pensive* and the *possessive* spectators alike.

As we will see, Grant’s work provides an excellent example of this “reinvention of textual analysis”, her audiovisual exploration of the *intertextual* relations between films enabling the spectator to understand not only something about the “influences” and “sources of inspiration” of a particular movie, but also, and perhaps more importantly, about the *textual* nature of audiovisual texts as well. But what I would like to emphasise, for now, is that Grant’s work is also eloquently illustrative of the “new wave of cinephilia” made possible by digital technologies. More than just a relevant audiovisual research tool about cinema, her essays must also be seen as a performative and highly self-conscious exploration of the spectatorial experiences typical of contemporary digitally mediated audiovisual culture. Grant’s essays will focus on her own “cinephiliac moments” (Keathley 2006), that is, the recurrent, compelling spectatorial experiences that have now been vastly multiplied by digital viewing practices, but that remain “verbally quite inexplicable (or, at least, difficult to explicate)” (Grant and Keathley 2014). Here, the audiovisual essay is used as a *self-discovery tool* that sheds light into previously unconscious spectatorial processes, while nevertheless producing some general insights about the films under analysis, as well as contemporary forms of cinephilia:

“Videographic film studies has a special potential to show something about our relationship with our cinematic objects of study, for it enables us to explore and express, in a particularly compelling way, how we use these objects imaginatively in our inner lives; and it can also be used to present something sharable about those objects — some attained knowledge or understanding — however surprising its content or unusual its form.” (Grant and Keathley 2014)

Traditionally, emotions, cinephile passions, and autobiography have always been repressed as a way to distinguish academic film studies from both film criticism and from the obsessive compulsions of the ordinary cinephile. What Grant suggests is, on the contrary, a type of knowledge about cinema, and our relation to it, that has flourished outside the specific context of film studies and that scholars are neither particularly comfortable with, nor have they been historically inclined to favour.

Grant’s audiovisual essays are illustrative of the form’s most exciting paths. Not the application of a predetermined method, but the result of continuous experimentation, her videos embody the rich methodological diversity of the contemporary digital audiovisual essay. Therefore, it would be as difficult as it would be misleading to pinpoint the key formal strategies of Grant’s videos, to link those strategies to specific themes, in short, to extricate a *method* from her vast videographic corpus. It is possible, however, to learn from Grant’s choices. A considerable portion of her written work can be described as an estimation of the different editing and compositional techniques she used. In the remainder of this section, I will briefly review those choices, suggesting how their successive use (and desertion) corresponds to important methodological changes and interests in Grant’s practice of the digital audiovisual essay. To retrace Grant’s engagements with the form will be, in other words, to retrace what can be learned from the *performance* of the digital audiovisual essay.

Sequential editing

Grant herself underlined the importance of the successive transitions in her work, from *sequential* to *synchronous* editing and the use of the *multiple-screen* technique; and, more recently, to the use of image *superimpositions*. These techniques illustrate the audiovisual essay's comparative strategies, putting different moving images and sounds into contact —literally so, in the case of image superimpositions—, bringing different cinephiliac moments together and learning about them through the process of their manipulation.

This is not to say that Grant precludes the use of verbal-based communication. Although she abandoned the use of the voice-over early on, she has used written text in quite creative ways. Moreover, experimentation with motion speed, reframing, the use of music, and the recombination of image and sound are present throughout Grant's videographic procedures, and constitute, as it were, a continuous backdrop throughout the important changes in the overall structure of her essays that I have identified above.



Figure 17: *Skipping Rope (Through Hitchcock's Joins)* (Catherine Grant, 2012)



Figure 18: *Skipping Rope (Through Hitchcock's Joins)* (Catherine Grant, 2012)

A good example of how sequential editing, written text and music are combined might be found in *Skipping Rope (Through Hitchcock's Joins)* (2012, 4min). The video is a collection of all the cuts in Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope* (1958). It was prompted by an article by D.A. Miller (1991) and sets out to illustrate, in an admittedly explanatory mode, not only all the disguised and undisguised cuts in the movie, but also Miller's discussion of editing and homosexuality. *Skipping Rope*... indulges both the fetishist compulsion to track down and watch the cuts, and the desire to make sense of a complex piece of scholarly writing. Grant's video is not, however, a simple accumulation of *Rope*'s cuts. The essay opens and closes using text quotations from Miller's article, which are combined with freeze frames from *Rope*'s first shots (in the preface) or superimposed to the movie's final shot (the only fixed shot in *Rope*). The cuts are shown in slow motion and a caption is superimposed to identify their number and the moment they appear in the movie, as well as whether they are disguised or undisguised cuts. While the cut is played in slow motion, the transitions from one cut to the other are shown using a cross fade. The video is accompanied by Francis Poulenc's piano piece *Variations on Perpetual Motion No.1* (except in the preface), but most of the cuts also reproduce an excerpt from the original soundtrack (a line of dialogue, or a sound). The captions of the cuts use a wipe transition effect, also used in the essay's opening credits, and evoked throughout the essay by the cross fade technique that binds the different cuts together. The typography of the written

quotations, especially the one superimposed in *Rope*'s final shot, highlights some words or expressions in a different colour, thus extracting a set of ideas that the spectator can then relate to other elements in the video. For example, the highlighted notion, from a J.P. Coursodon (2004) quotation, that *Rope* is characterised by its "perpetual motion" is obviously illustrated by the essay's editing rhythm, and is also placed in relation to the melodious, dance-like tempo of the musical piece chosen to accompany it (which, of course, is also titled "perpetual motion").

Even if, when compared to her other essays, *Skipping Rope...* seems excessively dependent on the article that triggered it, this video is far more than a simple explanation of Miller's work. The combined use of the aforementioned editing techniques, text superimpositions, music and original dialogue tracks, makes exceptionally obvious the homoerotic moments that were sublimated into a discussion about the apparent absence of editing when the film was released (the taboo of homosexuality *displaced* by the taboo of editing, as Miller suggests). But Grant's video also touches on other important issues, some of which are relevant to Hitchcock's film itself (the experimentation with altered motion underscored how the film contrasted movement and stasis for dramatic purposes), while others are more relevant to Grant's methodological experimentation with the audiovisual essay (such as the importance of music or the role of written text quotations).⁶² *Skipping Rope...* is therefore illustrative of Grant's willingness to learn about a film through its manipulation, and to allow herself to be led by that process. In her assessments of two of her earlier videos, *Unsentimental Education: On Claude Chabrol's Les Bonnes Femmes* (2009, 13min) and *True Likeness* (2010, 5min), Grant was particularly attuned to what the continuous experimentation with the form could teach her (Grant 2013; Grant 2014a).

⁶² In an alternative version of *Skipping Rope*, Grant uses an audio commentary to contextualize, but also to assess her methodological options in the original essay.



Figure 19: Zoom in movement in *Unsentimental Education: On Claude Chabrol's Les Bonnes Femmes*
(Catherine Grant, 2009)

Unsentimental Education... was Grant's first audiovisual essay. Unlike her later videos, this work has a voice-over commentary and the somewhat long duration of 13:50 minutes. Grant chose to analyse this particular movie because while she "had taught [it] many times and thought that [she] knew [it] very well," there was still a lingering impression of "strangeness" that neither she nor her students "had been able to articulate in words, in detail at least, in numerous individual sequence analyses in university seminars." (Grant 2010a) The essay is structured as a series of long sequences from Chabrol's film played in their original speed and, for the most part, accompanied by an audio commentary narrated by Grant herself. The original soundtrack is muted or turned down during the commentary; at times, it is reproduced in its original volume. No written text is used outside the opening and end credit sequences. The sequences taken from Chabrol's movie are manipulated to underline or illustrate more clearly a point made in the audio commentary. These changes take the form of a halting of motion accompanied by a zoom into the frame, or of a simple zoom into a specific element of the moving image. (This combination, usually identified as the "Ken Burns" effect, is a built-in feature in many editing programs). Exceptionally, the swimming pool sequence in *Les Bonnes Femmes* is analysed using a series of still frames, accompanied by Grant's commentary. All the sequences are separated by wipes or, more generally, fades to black, with the

notorious exception of the visit to the woods, “the film’s denouement”, which opens with a fade in from white.

The exceptional use of the audio commentary device is perhaps this video essay’s most important feature in the context of Grant’s later work. The text strongly evokes a DVD audio commentary, perhaps because the essay starts with the opening scene from Chabrol’s movie, stretches over long sequences of *Les Bonnes Femmes*, and, in spite of its moving literary quality, it does feel “largely improvised to accompany the re-editing, rather than pre-written” (Grant 2010a). However, *Unsentimental Education...*’s audio commentary hardly feels like the “mad, desperate, jiving riff over a fleeting, ever-vanishing film-object” (Martin 2012a) that characterises so many DVD vocal extras. On the contrary, Grant aptly places the flow of the moving image at the service of the commentary, *freezing* (via a still frame) and *fragmenting* it (through reframing or zooming in) to discuss a visual detail, a mise-en-scène decision, to provide biographic information about an actress; or indeed to allow it to gain a renewed autonomy, and authority, when she re-establishes the original synchronicity of Chabrol’s image and sound tracks. Even this “fairly sparse voiceover commentary” (Grant 2010a) later seemed too “wordy” for Grant. The *wordiness* of the commentary does indeed tend to confer an authoritative meaning to Chabrol’s sequences. In the very beginning of the video, for example, Grant comments on the opening shot of *Les Bonnes Femmes*, correcting the identification of the Genie of Liberty statue and arguing, in a quite definitive way, that “the film thus opens with an image of freedom, and it is freedom and tyranny that will be its central concerns.” The audio commentary also imposes its meaning on Grant’s editing options. For example, Grant establishes the connection between the characters’ animal costumes in the night club and the trip to the zoo sequences not only by the sequential editing of the two scenes, but also by the commentary that explains that, in the club as in the zoo, the predator-prey relationship is rendered problematic.

Unsentimental Education... provided Grant with important methodological lessons. First, it persuaded the author of the advantages of written over verbal commentary. Text citations combined or superimposed over film extracts would become integral to Grant’s audiovisual essaying practices, and a key strategy to

complement and explore (and even to challenge) the moving image's rich polysemy, rather than to narrow the range of possible interpretations of the audiovisual text. On the other hand, the motion alteration and fragmentation experiences (either inside the frame or bringing selected sequences together) illuminated the epistemological potential of *editing*:

"This (for me, uncanny) experience of repeatedly handling the sequence in and out of its original context did indeed produce new affective knowledge about it regarding the film's explorations of temporality and temporal experience throughout its duration, and particularly about the implacable logic of its film characters' captivity in human (and cinema) time." (Grant 2014a, 54)

Grant's video does illuminate some of *Les Bonnes Femmes*' strangeness, via its focus on topics such as the ambiguous love affair, or the direct cinematic address (in the final shot of the film), and other specific techniques such as "the film's constant moves from high to low, and its graphic matching of key shapes, like that of the statue at the beginning" (Grant 2010a). But the video's greatest achievement, as far as Grant is concerned, is what the manipulation of Chabrol's movie has (also) taught her about the affordances of digital viewing and editing technologies. More than a definitive interpretation of the movie, these technologies have enabled Grant to come to terms with an important spectatorial experience, and to communicate that experience to the spectators of her audiovisual essay.

The project of comparing different films would lead Grant to explore further the affordances of digital editing software. *True Likeness* (2010) was one of her first video comparisons of two films. Grant described the essay as her "first attempt at a scholarly kind of "mash up" aimed at examining "the obvious *and* obscure connections between the two films from which it extracts in ways that were both striking and, hopefully, more *precisely* illuminating with regard to their form *as films* than comparisons performed purely in a non-audiovisual format might be." (Grant 2013) Much like *Skipping Rope...*, the audiovisual essay was prompted by an article, in this case by Brigitte Peucker (2010) in which she argues that Michael Haneke's *Code Inconnu: Récit Incomplet de Divers Voyages*

(2010) borrows several elements from Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom* (1960). Although Peucker's comment refers to plot similarities between the two films, Grant's video comparison found many formal correspondences as well. These correspondences were only found after extensive digital manipulation of the two films and, presumably—even if this solution didn't reach the essay's final form—through the visualization of the superimposed timelines of the two films in the editing software. During the manipulation of the two films, Grant discovered, for example, similarities in the camera and character positioning of the two films.

While these similarities are shown sequentially, there are other editing strategies that link them together in a way that points to Grant's future use of superimpositions. At several points, Grant's use of the cross fade to connect sequences of the two films allows for similar blocking solutions to become visible as a visual superimposition (especially when both sequences are played in slow motion, as is often the case in these fades). The same effect is achieved through the use of dialogue, and even of the English subtitles from *Code Inconnu* that linger on *Peeping Tom*, or vice-versa, thus underscoring further deliberate and fortuitous correspondences. For example, the command "Show me your true face" (from *Code Inconnu*), now accompanies Moira Shearer's deformed face; and Mark's chilling stage direction "Imagine someone coming towards you, who wants to kill you," now haunts the sequence of the frightened little girl in Haneke's film.



Figure 20: Moira Shearer/Juliette Binoche in *True Likeness* (Catherine Grant, 2010)



Figure 21: *True Likeness* (Catherine Grant, 2010)

From a methodological point of view, the (unplanned) use of superimpositions in *True Likeness* transforms this video, as it were, into a *transitional* piece, anticipating future comparative editing strategies. The same video also introduces a theoretical principle underpinning both the multiple-screen comparisons and the superimpositions. Grant refers to Mikhail Iampolski's use of Gérard Genette's concept of intertextuality in the context of film analysis, describing it as "working through the many conscious and unconscious processes by which 'sources' —other texts or films— are used by filmmakers, as well as the intricacies of the chains of associations that come to produce the energy and force of individual films for spectators." (Grant 2013) Now able to use digital editing technologies for this purpose, Grant sees her work as "about *literally* putting the intertext in, alongside or over, or synchronously side by side with the film to explore all those kinds of connections." (Grant 2014e) The move from sequential to synchronous editing must therefore be seen less as a break than as a methodological refinement with the same analytical and cinephile purposes: to experiment with the generative potential of the *literal* insertion of one audiovisual text into another.

Multiple-screen comparisons

According to Grant, the move from sequential to simultaneous editing "wasn't especially thought through in advance; it was born more of a curiosity to see

what might be possible in intertextual film studies with picture-in-picture and multiple-screen effects in the non-linear editing programmes I was using.” (Grant 2013) The move from of this technique was stimulated by research on the use of the split-screen (Grant 2008; Grant 2010b), familiarity with the work of other audiovisual essayists using split-screen comparisons, such as Cristina Álvarez López (Grant 2013, notes 24 and 25), and became possible after the author learned how to use iMovie for that purpose using a simple YouTube “how-to” video (Grant 2014e).

In her article *Déjà-Viewing...* (2013), Grant analyses four multiple-screen essays from 2012 that are illustrative of her experimentation with this technique. *ImPersona* (2012, 1min) combines two sequences from *Persona* (Ingmar Bergman, 1966) and *Låt Den Rätte Komma In* (Tomas Alfredson, 2008). Just over one-minute long, the video shows a sequence from Bergman’s film in full frame, accompanied by a small frame of Alfredson’s film in the lower left side of the screen; midway through the video, immediately before the two children enter into a short dialogue exchange (subtitled in English), the films swap their position. The sequence from Alfredson’s film is muted and the prolonged eerie string note of Bergman’s sequence accompanies the remainder of the essay, muffling the children’s dialogue. In this way, *ImPersona* is somewhere in-between *sequential* and *synchronous* editing. The *simultaneity* of the sequences is complemented (and perhaps dominated) by their *successive* reproduction in full screen.



Figure 22: *ImPersona* (Catherine Grant, 2012)

Garden of Forking Paths? (2012, 3min) on the other hand, uses two equally-sized frames for a side-by-side comparison of the silent and sound versions of a sequence of Alfred Hitchcock's *Blackmail* (1929). A similar structure guides *All That Pastiche Allows* (2012, 3min), which compares the opening sequences of *All That Heaven Allows* (Douglas Sirk, 1955) and its 2002 remake by Todd Haynes, *Far From Heaven*. This essay was prompted by a research on the "aesthetic and affective kinship of some films directed by Douglas Sirk, Todd Haynes and, in future episodes, Rainer Werner Fassbinder" (Grant 2013), as well as by Richard Dyer's work on pastiche and affect (Dyer 2007) —in fact, a quotation by Dyer introduces the essay. Like the *Blackmail* essay, *All That Pastiche Allows* respects the timespan of the extracts of the two reproduced films. But here, the frames are placed vertically on top of each other (instead of side by side), in order to accommodate Hayne's use of a wide screen format. Grant chooses Hayne's soundtrack over Sirk's, which is nevertheless still audible in reduced volume.

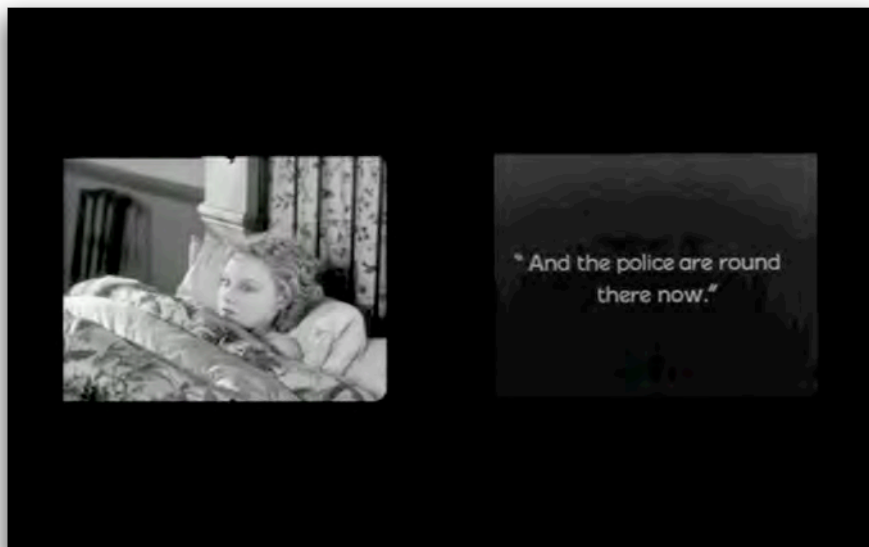


Figure 23: *Garden of Forking Paths?* (Catherine Grant, 2012)



Figure 24: *All That Pastiche Allows* (Catherine Grant, 2012)

Grant's experiments with simultaneous editing enact the comparative possibilities of the multiple-screen and, specifically, of the split-screen. The distinction is important because the term "multiple-screen" seems more adequate to describe the presence of numerous frames, of different sizes and relative positions inside the screen⁶³, than the more specific (even if much more frequent) side-by-side positioning of two equally-sized frames that defines the "split-screen" composition. The epistemological potential of Grant's multiple-screen compositions emerge from the "action of dividing the screen into parts" (Dias Branco 2008) that cue the spectator into connecting and comparing them. Regardless of the position and size of the frames, the split-screen is a technique that sparks "relationships of causality and simultaneity," and whose flagrant artificiality underscores authorship and hence the reflexive quality of the viewing experience (Dias Branco 2008). This editing technique suggests an active viewing process in at least two senses. First, because it tantalizes the spectator with the perceptually strenuous task of moving to and fro between the two frames, rapidly scanning each image for relevant information—and being helped, or confused, in that process by the combined soundtracks—, a process not unlike the "panoramic perception" described by Christian Keathley (Keathley 2006; quoted in Grant 2013). On the other hand, the spectator is also forced to

⁶³ Sérgio Dias Branco (2008) used, for the same purpose, although in the context of television studies, the concept of the "mosaic-screen".

cope with the “experience of a creeping recognition of *imperfect* doubling, an uncanny disjuncture between its two screens” (Grant 2013, commenting *Garden of Forking Paths?*). The juxtaposition of two disparate sequences may well prove the existence of formal correspondences, but those similarities might also convey a troubling impression of impossible simultaneity and illogical causality. Although Grant’s editing options might underline certain formal correspondences and similarities, the irreducible differences between the two films will necessarily generate formal and cognitive dissonances, both on the aural and visual levels. Those formal correspondences can prove puzzling to spectators, as they are confronted with the uncertain causal relations that come out of their simultaneous presentation. The spectatorial activity stimulated by the multiple-screen comparisons produces unpredictable outcomes.

In addition to Catherine Grant’s multiple-screen essays, described above, these compositional strategies have also been at the centre of many other videos (and their respective written companion pieces) by Cristina Álvarez López. In *Games* (2009, 5min), for example, which is a split-screen analysis of sequences from *Germany Year Zero* (Roberto Rossellini, 1948) and *Ivan’s Childhood* (Andrei Tarkovsky, 1962), the initial comparative purpose “based mainly on uniformity and analogy [...] hit a crisis once the heterogeneity of the two fragments became evident” (Álvarez López and Martin 2014b). However, this heterogeneity became itself illuminating and allowed the author to imagine a dialogue between the two films —more precisely, between the two child-characters— because, or in spite of, the “distinct nature of the scenes” (Álvarez López and Martin 2014b). This dialogue allows, therefore, one film to irrigate the meaning of another through the simultaneous presentation of contrasting images and sounds. This choice is not unlike the one structuring Cristina Álvarez López’s *Double lives, second chances* (2011, 9min), in which careful editing often seems to transform the shots of *Inland Empire* (David Lynch, 2006) into the reverse-shots of *The Double Life of Veronique* (Krzysztof Kieslowski, 1991), and vice-versa.



Figure 25: *Games* (Cristina Álvarez López, 2009)

As Álvarez López, but also Grant's, experiments with the split-screen video comparisons show, this editing technique seems especially suited to the purposes of the digital audiovisual essay. On the one hand, it underscores its *processual* nature as a discovery led by experimentation and the continuous manipulation of the audiovisual text via digital editing technologies. In this process, "action precedes thought" and the finished essay seems to suggest or re-enact for the viewer some of the manipulating strategies that the essayist experimented with in his editing software. Indeed, both the *sequential* and the *simultaneous* modes of viewing (and in the latter case, either using the split-screen technique, or the superimposition effect) can all be understood as constitutive of the viewing options the essayist can choose from while/before deciding how to edit his video. These options, in short, are born out of the affordances of digital editing software, which allow the visualization of digitized films either as thumbnails, as parallel timelines, or in concurrent preview windows. Kevin B. Lee is probably the digital essayist who has taken this matter furthest, structuring some of his essays on the basis of those individual elements of digital editing programs, and finally including the representation of that program window itself in his videos (see below). On the other hand, the multiple-screen technique involves, as we've seen, a *perceptually charged* mode of viewing. The active viewing encouraged by the split-screen produces unpredictable viewing experiences that to a great extent keep in check the possibility of a closed meaning. In spite of what the essayist's choices might hope

to suggest, the internal multiplication of the screen vastly complicates the act of reception —meaning seems to be suspended in favour of the consciousness of the editing strategies that contribute to its formation. In this way, the multiple-screen is in close relation to the spatialization of editing that many engagements with contemporary audiovisual culture disclose.

Superimpositions

It is, therefore, as a further refinement of the comparative purposes of sequential and simultaneous editing, of their ability to reproduce at one and the same time the viewing *and* the editing processes, the analytical *and* cinephiliac experiences, that the more recent use of superimposition effects in Grant's work must be understood. In *Joan Webster Shares a Smoke* (2013, 1min), Grant superimposes a scene from *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans* (1927) with another from *I Know Where I'm Going* (Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, 1945). Both are replayed in very slow motion and gravitate around a moment (00:23) when the positions of the two actresses seem to coincide perfectly, hence creating the impression that Margaret Livingston (the "Woman from the City") leans to light her cigarette from the hands of Joan Webster. The short duration of the video, just under 2 minutes, and the use of an extract from *Sunrise*'s musical score, enhances that central yet fleeting moment in which the two actresses' bodies are aligned. The superimposition motif is further amplified by the fact that Margaret Livingston's body is accompanied by her reflected image in a mirror, and also by the knowledge that this scene appears originally in *Sunrise* as a superimposition. In a significantly more impressive way than the multiple-screen technique could manage, the simultaneous presence of the two actresses within the frame, and what is more, the fact that they apparently interact with each other, generates an impossible temporal and causal relationship.



Figure 26: *Joan Webster Shares a Smoke* (Catherine Grant, 2013)

Efface (2013, 1min) has a similar structure. This equally short video (1:29) combines, also in very slow motion, a scene from Ingmar Bergman's *Persona* (1966) and another from Jean Cocteau's *Orphée* (1955). Again, the image of the child is dissolved into that of the adult actor in a way that underlines the same camera position, scale of shot, frontal body position and hand movements. The video ends immediately after Jean Marais looks directly at the camera. Here, Grant highlights a number of correspondences, not only between the bodies of the two actors, but especially between screen and mirror and, therefore, between the functions of the human face and the close-up shot as reflection and projection. Maybe this is why, unlike *Joan Webster shares a smoke*, *Efface's* almost continuous superimposition of the two actors' faces is reminiscent of a morphing effect and, therefore, is able to convey the instability of identity usually associated with this technique⁶⁴.

⁶⁴ On this subject, see Scott Bukatman (2000) and Steven Shaviro (2010).



Figure 27: *Efface* (Catherine Grant, 2013)

The superimposition effect takes the literal insertion of the intertextual source of a film one step further by pasting it into the moving image itself. In this way, Grant problematizes the notion of “source” and creates an image that works as a “palimpsest,” a concept the author takes up from Pam Cook and, in particular, from Cook’s comment on the relation between the films combined in *Joan Webster shares a smoke*: “Sunrise provides a kind of ur-text that can be detected in *I Know Where I’m Going*, turning it into a palimpsest.” (Cook 2005, 105–6; quoted in *Efface*) Understood as a layered structure with undecided hierarchical and causal relations, the palimpsest-like image created by the superimposition technique accommodates the “desire to make films speak together” (Grant 2014e). In other words, by exploring its intertextual relations, it reveals the arbitrary, constructed qualities of the audiovisual text. However, the superimposition leaves those relations suspended, their causality not fully articulated. In this way, the technique also replicates the nature of many cinephiliac experiences: fleeting, difficult to grasp and often impossible to articulate verbally. The climax of Grant’s methodological experimentation, superimpositions demonstrate the brief, elusive and inexplicable intuitions that often spark textual analysis and personal cinephiliac experiences alike.

Moments of recognition

As I said in the beginning of this section, perhaps Grant's most original contribution to the digital audiovisual essay is her practice of the form not only as an audiovisual research tool to investigate cinema, but also as an exploration of her personal relation to cinema. In other words, Grant's continuous methodological experimentation must also be seen as an attempt to make sense of her recurrent cinephiliac experiences, which is to say, to investigate her personal investment in certain themes, visual motifs, and film techniques.

While this issue is discussed in most of Grant's written work, and could arguably be found in many, if not all, of her audiovisual essays, it is at the centre of two of her most recent videos: *The Vertigo of Anagnorisis* (2012, 3min) and *Uncanny Fusion? Journey to Mixed-up Files* (2014, 4min). *The Vertigo of Anagnorisis* can still be considered (and was admittedly conceived as) an experience in intertextuality, that is, an exploration of the observable and hidden relations between audiovisual texts. Here, two fall sequences from *Vertigo* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1958) and *Star Wars Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back* (Irvin Kershner, 1980) are used to investigate the rhetorical strategy of *anagnorisis*, "the point in the plot, especially of a tragedy, at which the protagonist recognizes his or her or some other character's true identity or discovers the true nature of his or her own situation" (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary* definition, quoted in the beginning of the essay). In those decisive moments, which take place in life-threatening situations, Scottie learns about his vertigo while hanging from a ledge after a misstep during a rooftop pursuit, and Luke learns that the evil Darth Vader is his father after having his right hand amputated in a light saber duel with him. In both instances, a fall ensues, dramatically emphasising the unsettling experience of discovering a previously unknown truth about oneself.

The essay is structured as a "standard" split-screen comparison. After a 17-second introduction that displays the dictionary definition of *anagnorisis* and the title of the video, two equally-sized screens reproduce each sequence. *Vertigo's* audio track (which has no dialogues) is muted for the most part of the video and only replaces *Star Wars'* in the very final seconds. The *Vertigo* sequence was also slowed down by Grant to match the duration of the other

extract. These options accentuate the perception of *Star Wars'* sequence as more action- and dialogue-driven, while allowing the spectator to concentrate on the non-verbal elements of Jimmy Stewart's performance, namely his facial expressions as he is holding on. The "synchronous flow" (Grant 2013) that results from this side-by-side comparison reveals almost as many correspondences as dissonances, conveying "deeper similarities and inverted echoes" (Grant 2013).

To start with the dissonances, we can note that *Star Wars'* use of mostly static shots contrasts with the numerous pan movements in *Vertigo*. In the first part of the video, *Star Wars* employs mostly close-up shots, while *Vertigo* shows the San Francisco cityscape in open shots. Synchronous moments abound after Darth Vader disarms Luke and starts to reveal his identity. Vader's set-up phrase ("Obi-wan never told you what happened to your father?") is matched by Scottie's first vertigo, represented by a high-angle track forward movement combined with a zoom out of the alley below. The revelation itself finds both Luke and Scottie in a close-up shot, the latter leaning his head back, as if about to faint. Luke's moment of denial still in close-up, is then accompanied by Scottie's rolling eyes, before cutting to the alley below.

This is not to say that there aren't some puzzling correspondences as well. Vader's body sometimes seems to echo that of Scottie himself, or even the policeman that tries to help Scottie —both are dressed in black, both reach their hands out to the spectator, and both are shot from a low-angle. And when Vader seals his revelation ("It is your destiny"), his off-screen dialogue line matches the policeman's fall and Luke's downcast eyes. It is as if Luke understands, as we spectators do, that his destiny has already been prefigured by the policeman's fall and by the striking similarity between the high-angles showing the alley and the bottomless tunnel below. When Luke begins to fall, *Vertigo's* screen fades to black, *Star Wars'* audio track is muted, and the high-pitch string note from *Vertigo's* sequence is heard. While Luke is shown falling in slow motion, a written quotation takes the place of *Vertigo's* sequence and reads: "falling is like a marker of the abysmal-like structure of trauma" (Borden 2012; quoted in *The Vertigo of Anagnorisis*). The text is slowly magnified, thus mimicking the

combination of track forward and zoom out that simulated Scottie's vertigo earlier.

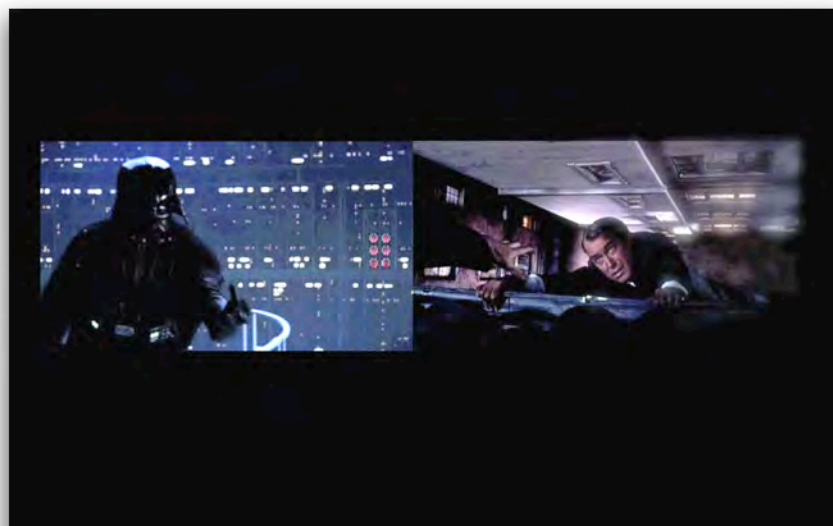


Figure 28: *The Vertigo of Anagnorisis* (Catherine Grant, 2012)

To Grant, these two films were “personally charged” long before their similarities became evident: “*Vertigo*, a favourite Hitchcock film, and *Star Wars Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back* (Irvin Kershner, 1980) which I remember seeing in the cinema with my family three years before I was told that the father who had raised me was not my biological parent.” (Grant 2013) Although Grant would later write about the two films and also about anagnorisis, it was only “after seeing thumbnail images from the chosen sequences juxtaposed in [her] video editor project library” (Grant 2013) that she became aware of their similarities. And it was only then that she became, as it were, conscious of the relation the films bore to her own biography and how this relation, in turn, laid at the origin of her interest in certain films, visual motifs, and themes. In other words, *The Vertigo of Anagnorisis* is not only about how this specific rhetorical device might be associated with the cultural trope of falling, but also about the importance of these visual motifs and themes in the personal biography of the author. The essay’s own anagnorisis, however, is not so much Grant’s recognition of a biographical episode, but the discovery that films and biography could illuminate each other through the practice of the audiovisual essay.

Grant further pursued this notion in “The Use of an Illusion,” (2014) an article co-written with Christian Keathley, and in her 2014 video, *Uncanny fusion? Journey to Mixed-up Files* (to which one could add Keathley’s essay *SFR*, published in the same article). *Uncanny fusion?* compares sequences from *The Hideaways* (also known as *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler*; Fielder Cook, 1973) and *Journey to Italy* (Roberto Rossellini, 1954). The essay was motivated by Grant’s sense of “bodily connection” and “enthrallment” when she first watched, at age 33, the museum sequence in Rossellini’s film, which she later associated with a film watched when she was a 13-year-old teenager, also starring Ingrid Bergman, and where a girl (Claudia/Sally Prager) attempts to solve a mystery in a museum. This information is conveyed in the form of a written commentary combined with short, slow motion extracts from both films, using once again a traditional split-screen device. Claudia then receives special attention through the reproduction in slow motion, altered colour and a mirroring effect of a shot of her running happily in a field.

In both films, Grant notes, music seems to have cued an acute cinephiliac experience. But, like in *The Vertigo of Anagnorisis*, and in so many of her previous videographic work, the musical and many other connections between the two films were only discovered “by importing digitised footage from the two films into [her] video editing program and playing with it over and over again, moving it around, and endlessly experimenting with different montage combinations and timings.” (Grant and Keathley 2014) The digital exploration of the films identified the common use of modal tones, a musical technique employed with the generic purpose of expressing “uncertainty and uncanniness”, (Grant and Keathley 2014) and which, in these films is used, more specifically, to create an atmosphere of unsolved mystery. This discovery is illustrated, in the essay, by means of an introductory sequence (up to 1:47) in which a sequential editing alternates between the two sequences and their original soundtracks. This, in turn, led to the discovery of other connections between the films, namely their “distilled staging of processes of decryption and sudden discovery” (Grant and Keathley 2014) directed, in both cases, at sculptural objects.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Further research uncovered other relations in the production stories of both films; see Grant and Keathley (2014).

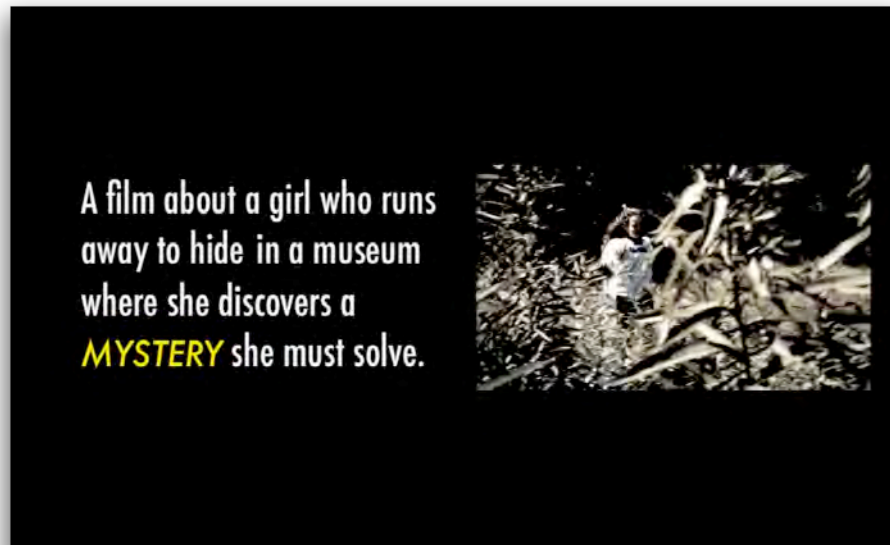


Figure 29: *Uncanny Fusion? Journey to Mixed-up Files* (Catherine Grant, 2014)

Grant addressed her pull toward these films, and discovered connections between them, by using Christopher Bollas's notion of "aesthetic experience": "an individual feels a deep subjective rapport with an object [...] and experiences an uncanny fusion with [it, with the sense] of being reminded of something never cognitively apprehended but existentially known," something the author termed suggestively as an "unthought known" (Bollas 1987; quoted in Grant and Keathley 2014). The notion of "aesthetic experience" is represented in the video through the sequential editing of scenes from the two films, in slow motion, with superimposed written quotations from Bollas' article. What motivated Grant in this research was, therefore, not only to discover the relations *between the films*, but also *between the films and an unthought known in her own biography* —one could even venture that the discovery of connections between the two films is instrumental to approach and reveal that "unthought known". Through audiovisual research and manipulation Grant was finally able to make full sense of the relation between the two earlier cinephiliac moments: Bergman's visit to the museum not only illustrates a paradigmatic aesthetic experience, but it also resonates with Grant's childhood memory of Claudia's curiosity about the author of the missing statue (and her anxiety about the perspective of never knowing his identity), which in turn resonates deeply with Grant's own biography.

More recently, the preference for short essays prolonged Grant's interest in the use of superimpositions to experiment with condensed, "ideogrammic

methods of meaning production” (Grant 2014e) that prevent a rhetoric of over-interpretation with the purpose of retaining both an intense cinephiliac experience and the thrill of undecided inter-textual relations. Some of Grant’s most recent videos are indeed quite short, under 3 minutes. *Film tweets* (2013), for example, is merely 30 seconds long. It uses slow motion and superimpositions to show how the sound of bird singing accompanies moments of character “absorption in herself in a particular moment” in both *Blackmail* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1929) and *Carnival of Souls* (Herk Harvey, 1962). These individual short pieces must also be seen, according to Grant, as “the basis for larger or longer pieces of audiovisual work, or written work, or multimedia practice more generally.” (Grant 2014e) While the ambivalent status of these essays can make their analysis more challenging (are they finished pieces or part of a larger work still in progress?), this also neatly summarizes the role Grant attributes to the audiovisual essay in the context of online culture. These pieces, just like many other contemporary audiovisual texts, will be circulated, “broken up and re-formed” (Grant 2014e). Their duration and internal structure —the brief reminder of the similarities between textual analysis and cinephilia—merely reflects a mode of reception that seems especially suited to the endless cycle of audiovisual consumption of which they are also a part.

In this way, although Grant provides valuable insights into the mechanisms that make the audiovisual essay such an exemplary text of contemporary audiovisual culture, she never questions its relation to that context. Does this exploration of the affordances of digital viewing and editing techniques amount to a critique of their function in the cycle of audiovisual consumption? And, more importantly, where does the audiovisual essay stand in relation to the digitally mediated culture of which it is also a product? To address these questions we must move beyond the academic uses of the contemporary audiovisual essay and investigate the contrasting examples of ::kogonada and Kevin B. Lee.

3.3. ::kogonada: tautological supercuts

David Bordwell's and Catherine Grant's use of the digital audiovisual essay has showcased, in very different ways, the pedagogical and creative potentials of the form. They also represent two good examples of the self-conscious exploration of the epistemological potential internalized by digital viewing and editing technologies. Even if their essays are available online, and tap into renowned movies or sharable spectatorial experiences, this work is still done in the restricted context of academia, where they seek institutional recognition either as an alternative pedagogical tool (Bordwell), or as a legitimate scholarly research method (Grant). To understand just how widespread that epistemological potential has become—but also its ambiguous relation to mass culture—we must now look beyond the academic field and take into account the digital audiovisual essays produced by cinephiles and online film critics. By focusing on the work of ::kogonada and Kevin B. Lee, I hope to illustrate the intimate relation that exists between the audiovisual essay and many of the popular cultural forms and viewing situations that characterise digitally mediated culture today. Furthermore, I also hope to show how some essayists have questioned the role of the digital audiovisual essay in relation to digitally mediated culture, of which it is such an exemplary product.

“Nicely cut together”

::kogonada is the author of some of the most visually compelling digital audiovisual essays in recent years, and a key figure behind the growing popularity of the form. Widely viewed and shared online, his videos have been shown at film festivals and special screenings⁶⁶, he has been the object of articles in the mainstream press (Baldegg 2012), and has had videos commissioned by *Sight & Sound* magazine and Criterion. His work has appealed not only to ordinary online viewers, but also to scholars, who have curated and written

⁶⁶ *Tempo//Basho* (2014) and *Against Tyranny* (2014) were screened at the IFC Center (New York) in September 2014, as part of the *Filmmaker Magazine's* “25 New Faces of Independent Film” event.

about some of his videos. The alias ::kogonada has been used since 2012 by the filmmaker E. Joong-Eun Park, also known as Ernie Park, to sign his audiovisual essays⁶⁷. Park, who emigrated with his family from Asia to the US when he was a child, has stated that he never felt comfortable with his American name (S.M. 2014), but he also hinted that the choice of his alias might be a reference to Kogô Noda (Yasujiro Ozu's frequent screenwriting collaborator) and thus a homage to his favourite filmmaker (Poritsky 2012). In fact, Park's admiration for the Japanese filmmaker led him to start a Ph.D. dissertation in critical theory about Ozu, time and modernity, issues that would remain central to much of his later work. His particular interest in Ozu can be attested since *Late Summer* (2012), Park's first fictional feature, which was described as an adaptation of Ozu's *Late Autumn* (1960) transposed to the American Black South⁶⁸. The Japanese filmmaker was also the focus of the audiovisual essay *Ozu // Passageways* (2012), a compilation of empty hallways shots in his films. This short piece would eventually lead to a larger essay on Ozu's cinema titled *Tempo // Basho* (2014) (Macaulay 2014).

The video essays of ::kogonada are expertly crafted pieces, structured around an easily identifiable idea or visual motif. The savvy use of editing and music transform his videos into extremely rhythmic pieces that one is eager to watch again and again. ::kogonada uses, to this purpose, almost every technique in the digital audiovisual essay repertoire —such as sequential editing, split-screens, superimposed written text and diagrams, voice-over commentary, motion alterations, and superimpositions—, and has recently introduced new, original ones, such as the “GIF-effect”.

Many of ::kogonada's earlier un-commissioned videos have been described as “supercuts”. The supercut is a popular online form which was defined by Andy Baio as the “obsessive-compulsive montages of video clips, meticulously isolating every instance of a single item, usually clichés, phrases,

⁶⁷ In 2007, Park and Michael Graziano founded the production company Uji Films, and have since co-directed the documentaries *Young Arabs* (2008) and *Lunch Line* (2010), among others. *Late Summer* (2012), also written by Park, was his first fiction feature.

⁶⁸ “If Yasujiro Ozu could set a film in the Black South, it might look a lot like LATE SUMMER, Ernie Park's glowing adaptation of films like Ozu's *Late Autumn*. Park not only riffs on Ozu's tales of family love and social belonging, he crafts a kindred poetic language, one born little by little, over time... in Nashville.” Christina Ree, quoted in the movie's production notes. See, <http://vimeo.com/30416879>.

and other tropes.” (Baio 2014) He advanced the term and the definition (2008), and has since created a website⁶⁹ to showcase the multiple manifestations of the form, which embraces not only film and television, but also video games. If the concept is extended to also include compilations of shots with the same type of function, angle, framing, as well as similar pro-filmic content, the supercut could arguably be used to describe many of ::kogonada’s videos. *Breaking Bad // POV* (2012, 2min), for instance, compiles some of the subjective camera shots in that television series; *Wes Anderson // From Above* (2012, 48s) and *Tarantino // From Below* (2012, 1min) showcase the use of high- and low-angle shots in those directors’ films; *Kubrick // One-Point Perspective* (2012, 1min) and *Wes Anderson // Centered* (2014, 2min) collect examples of depth cueing through the use of central linear perspective and shot compositions with centred framing; and *Malick: Fire & Water* (2013, 1min), *Hands of Bresson* (2014, 4min) and *Eyes of Hitchcock* (2014, 1min) all compile shots of the elements mentioned in the title from the work of the respective filmmakers.

While borrowing from the structure and the cultural currency of the supercut, ::kogonada is, however, tapping into a controversial form:

“As a vehicle for social critique, though, the supercut as such may have limited potential. Mostly the form translates a cliché into an experience of duration; the best supercuts are indeed durational affairs, offering a way of knowing that can only be achieved through time. But often the movies fail from obviousness.” (McCormack 2011)

::kogonada’s particular use of the supercut could not be farther from this *obviousness*, which is not to say that his videos do not lean more towards an affirmative, consumption-oriented, rather than a critical relation with contemporary audiovisual culture. In fact, and as I will argue, the enthralling craftsmanship of ::kogonada’s interpretation of the supercut might very well be linked to this a-critical attitude towards contemporary audiovisual culture.

According to ::kogonada, he was not aware of the term ‘supercut’ until it was used to describe his earlier work. ::kogonada himself prefers to describe his work as “video essays,” not only because he eventually produced more elaborate

⁶⁹ <http://supercut.org/>

works (*Linklater: On Cinema & Time* (2013), *The World According to Koreeda Hirokazu* (2013), *What is Neorealism?* (2014), *Tempo // Basho* (2014)), but also because, and to be fair, his essays have always extended beyond a narrow understanding of the category. These distinctions are not intended to establish which of ::kigonada's videos are *essayistic* or not, and which are supercuts or not. On the contrary, I wish to work out how the two practices enrich each other—and how, in particular, the audiovisual essay might have inherited the supercut's ambiguous relation to mass culture when it assimilated its a-critical practice of *montage*.

Many of ::kigonada's videos extend, as I have said, beyond Baio's definition of the supercut. Not only do they accumulate shots with similar narrative tropes (as most supercuts do), but they also collect recurrent types of shots and film techniques. In this way, his work can be described as an auteurist-oriented search for the stylistic signatures that every filmmaker's creative genius supposedly imprints in his or her oeuvre. However, the illustration of this signature is not systematic, as would be the case in a typical supercut. Nor is it necessarily the main purpose of ::kigonada's videos:

“For me, it's been a matter of contemplating which particular technique from these directors would *cut nicely together* (with many of these auteurs, it's not just one technique you could highlight, but a number of them). I'm less interested in documenting every example of a particular technique in the work of a director, than I am putting together something that is both *attuning and visually interesting*.” (Poritsky 2012; my emphasis)

::kigonada's videos, in fact, have complex structures based on the variation of each shot's duration, the existence of internal sequences that group shots together according to subtle variations and contribute to the overall rhythm of the video, alongside the use of music, which guides the cutting and the internal organization of the video in autonomous sections. The use of elements usually found in the essay, such as text and diagrams, and image superimpositions, further distance ::kigonada's work from the ordinary supercut. *Wes Anderson // From Above* (2012, 48s) compiles high-angle shots from Anderson's films up to *Moonrise Kingdom* (2012). All are subjective shots,

perpendicular to the body of the characters, who manipulate something they hold in their hands or placed on a table or on the ground in front of them. The actions performed by the characters are grouped in series, some of which include only two shots: holding something with both hands, spinning an object, moving an arm across the frame, grabbing, eating, displaying something in the palm of the hand, turning a page, opening closed objects, writing, placing both hands on a surface, etc. In many instances, graphic and action matches reinforce the relations between the shots; and in some cases, these seem to be the only motivation for the cut.

Music also plays a decisive role in the cutting decisions. In fact, the video itself is bookended by an opening shot where a record player starts playing (to which corresponds the beginning of the musical score) and a closing shot of a tape player coming to a halt (in synch with the end of the musical soundtrack). The video's cutting pace is coordinated with the music's tempo, but some series of cuts are very precisely synchronised with a rapid series of xylophone notes. Moreover, the different sections in the musical score highlight certain moments in the image track: for example, the slower pace after 00:28 is synchronised with the writing sequence, whose shots are also slightly longer than the video's average shot length. The combined use of musical and visual cutting cues transform an otherwise monotonous grouping of similar shots into a rhythmic sequence with differently paced sequences that eventually build up to a climax, followed by a final denouement.



Figure 30: Wes Anderson // *From Above* (::kogonada, 2012)

Many of ::kogonada's earlier "supercut" videos have the same complex structure. In *Ozu // Passageways* (2012, 1min), the cutting is also often synchronised with the music. Furthermore, the split-screen structure allows numerous action matches to be produced not only sequentially, in the interior of each screen, but also simultaneously, across the two frames. Combined with the variable duration of the shots, this editing effect dramatically increases the video's rhythmic impression, in a clear contrast with its foundational premise of collecting "empty" shots, both from a spatial but also from a narrative point of view.



Figure 31: *Ozu // Passageways* (::kogonada, 2012)

Hands of Bresson (2014, 4min) also displays a complex structure, either by arranging the shots in thematic sub-series (hands holding other hands, holding containers with various liquids, counting and exchanging money, closing purses, moving slowly, holding guns, etc.); by establishing continuity matches between different films (cleaning up a glass broken in a previous shot/film); or by its subtle combination of each extract's original soundtrack with a piano piece (which only once is muted by a diegetic music source, a radio that is switched on and off). Here, the simple pretext of the supercut is transformed, once again, into an editing exercise in which every shot bears a graphic, action, or thematic relation with each other. This creates micro-narrative relations across Bresson's films, which seem to contribute less to explaining the role of this particular type

of shot in the filmmaker's work than to express ::kogonada's playful inventiveness and his mastery of editing techniques.

This mastery is particularly glaring in *Kubrick // One-Point Perspective* (2012, 1min), one of ::kogonada's most elaborately-structured essays, and also one of his most widely watched pieces. Here, the editing is dictated by the music, which determines the overall duration of the moving images, their cutting cues, and even their internal repetition in the form of a repetitive loop (in the central section of the video). After the title shot, the essay immediately presents its argument by superimposing a central linear perspective diagram on a rapid series of shots from Kubrick's movies. The same shots will then be repeated at a slower pace and without the diagram, the cuts synchronised with the music. After 00:42, a chorus joins in, and the editing, while maintaining the same rhythm, begins including either shots with camera movement or with actor movement inside the frame. At 00:54, a new musical section begins, its frantic pace signalled by the rapid cross-cutting between two shots from *The Shining* (1980) and *Barry Lyndon* (1975), thus establishing a perfect graphic and action match between the two actors at the centre of the framing. The previous editing continues, thus joining the music in the preparation of the imminent climax and the division of some shots into smaller units, their duration slowly and progressively revealed to the viewer (for example, a forward dolly shot towards *2001's* black monolith is broken up in at least 8 individual shots) also conveys the sense of impending resolution. Finally, and immediately after the last monolith shot almost entirely fills the frame, the climax sequence begins (1:19). All the shots are repeated in a rapid sequence, to which is superimposed a shot from *2001's* end scene. When the music comes to a literal bang, the monolith dolly shot is resumed, producing a black frame that is rapidly cross-faded with another shot from *2001's* final sequence (a stellar explosion), which then fades to black to show the final shot of the essay, Jack Nicholson staggering in the snow in *The Shining*.

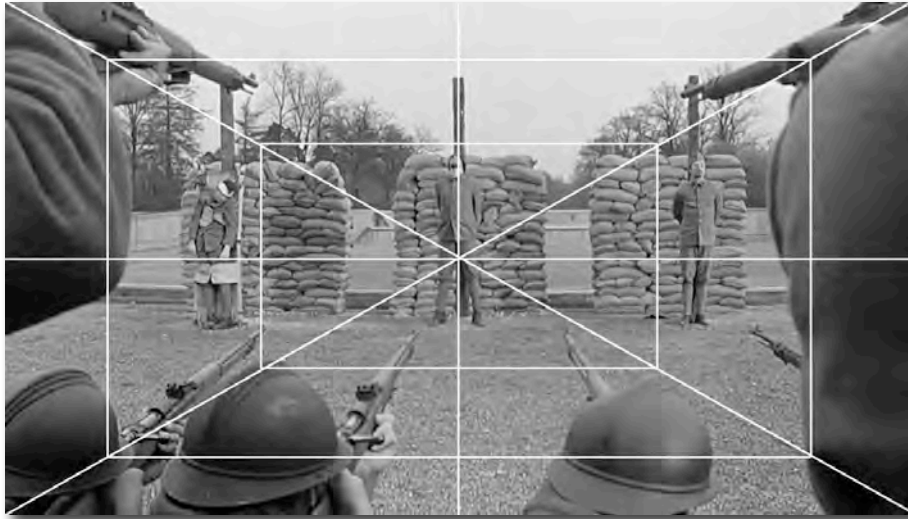


Figure 32: Kubrick // *One-Point Perspective* (::kogonada, 2012)

One of ::kogonada's most recent supercut videos, *Eyes of Hitchcock* (2014, 1min) takes the role of music and the ostensive presence of editing even further. *Eyes of Hitchcock* is also predetermined by the duration and internal changes of its accompanying musical piece. After a three-shot title sequence composed of extreme close-up shots of eyes, the video goes on, much like the Kubrick video, to cut between a series of other close-ups, the duration of which is fragmented throughout. However, instead of allowing every shot to progress a little further, ::kogonada suspends their advance by repeatedly moving each fragment back and forth. This type of manipulation, which I will term "GIF-effect" because it so strongly resembles the loop animations of series of still images that bear this name, produces a number of uncanny impressions on the viewer. Although the movement derived from the effect is obviously artificial, the result is that the actors appear to be gasping, or nodding their heads in disbelief, as if caught in a dangerous or surprising situation —as indeed we know many of them are, if we are familiar with the characters and the respective film plots. On the other hand, the movements are very carefully synchronised with the music's rhythm, which would lead to the also uncanny supposition that the actors are moving their bodies to the rhythm of ::kogonada's soundtrack.

To conclude, if ::kogonada's videos stretch the boundaries of the supercut, they do so in a way that once again brings his editing proficiency into relief:

“Within the world of appropriation, the supercut is a kind of anti-readymade. It telegraphs work and time investment, even a sort of mastery. The more discursive the supercut, the more impressive it is in this regard.” (McCormack 2011)

::kogonada’s essays can be considered discursive, but only as a poor, a-critical expression of montage. They efficiently command a great number of editing techniques, but do not convey analytical or explanatory arguments about the films, nor about the true relational nature of editing itself. Therefore, it is primarily the purely visual, graphic and rhythmic aspects of *editing* (and not its self-conscious, critical, intellectual iterations as *montage*) that become the object of these videos. Nowhere is this more obvious than in *What is Neorealism?* (2013), which is as much an investigation into the role of editing in the definition of neorealism as an exploration of the expressive possibilities of (::kogonada’s somewhat exhibitionist command of) editing in the digital audiovisual essay.

What is editing?

What is Neorealism? (2013, 4min) conforms to the more traditional audiovisual essay form; it is about an important topic in the history of cinema, was published online (it was commissioned by *Sight & Sound* on the occasion of the BFI Southbank season, “The Roots of Neorealism” that ran in May-June 2013), and uses some of the form’s customary techniques, such as the voice-over commentary, the multiple-screen, and written quotations. The essay’s premise is the comparison between Vittorio De Sica’s *Terminal Station* (1953) and the 17-minute shorter version cut by David O. Selznick, released as *Indiscretion of an American Wife* (1953). The comparison itself is made through the use of a split-screen device in which the two films are synchronised, as though with a traditional film synchroniser table: once a cut is identified in one version, that playback is stopped, while the second version is forwarded to catch-up with the first one; and individual frame counters make it possible to note both the total length of each roll and the different lengths of specific shots. ::kogonada’s video works as a *digital synchroniser* that plays the two versions side-by-side,

superimposing on each image textual information about the differences between them. For example, a cut is signalled by a freeze frame and the superimposition of the word “cut”; the fast-forwarding of one version is flagged by the indication of the corresponding speed (using a nomenclature reminiscent of the DVD viewing context, or of a digital editing software: 4x, 8x); and the different shot lengths are identified through the superimposition of a frame count. In this way, ::kogonada identifies and explains Selznick’s cuts, his voice-over commentary underscoring, as it were, the conclusions his split-screen comparison already make evident. Selznick’s options are not, however, the focus of ::kogonada’s attention. If they were, he might have shown how Selznick’s version abridges the psychological characterization and motivations of the female protagonist, with the ideological consequence of eliminating “the unresolved, irresolvable conflict between personal romantic fulfilment and family obligation” (Kehr 2013) that fuelled De Sica’s version. On the contrary, Selznick’s cuts are subordinated to ::kogonada’s main purpose: to reveal something about neorealism itself. According to ::kogonada’s analysis, Selznick’s re-editing of *Terminal Station* systematically eliminated the “in-between moments” in which the lead characters have left the frame and “in which time and place seem more critical than plot or story” (*What is Neorealism?* audio commentary). These moments, which have no place within Hollywood conventions and that can only be seen in that context as wasteful and excessive, unnecessary distractions, must therefore constitute, ::kogonada suggests, a key feature of the Italian neorealist cinema.

If, as ::kogonada argues, “[t]o examine the cuts of a filmmaker is to uncover an approach to cinema,” (::kogonada 2014) in this case, the cinematic tradition of neo-realism, it also reveals an important strategy of meaning-production of cinema in general:

“Every cut is a form of judgment, whether it takes place on the set or in the editing room. A cut reveals what matters and what doesn’t. It delineates the essential from the non-essential.” (::kogonada 2014)

Editing itself, as much as the specific editing conventions that distinguish Hollywood cinema from Italian neorealism, must therefore be seen as the object of ::kogonada’s *What is Neorealism?* The essay’s other object becomes evident

from a methodological point of view. ::kogonada uses a variety of editing techniques to compare the two versions. Not only does he use the multiple-screen in different ways (different combinations of motion alterations and freeze frames in each screen; different combinations of superimposed frame counts or of the word “cut”; and even the simultaneous reproduction of the same shot), but he also uses a six-frame multiple-screen and the sequential editing of shots that are played, stopped and resumed to denote the presence (or absence) of a cut. The use of different techniques to argue the same idea certainly reinforces his general argument, but must also be understood, once more, as a demonstration of the author’s own creativity and his mastery of editing.

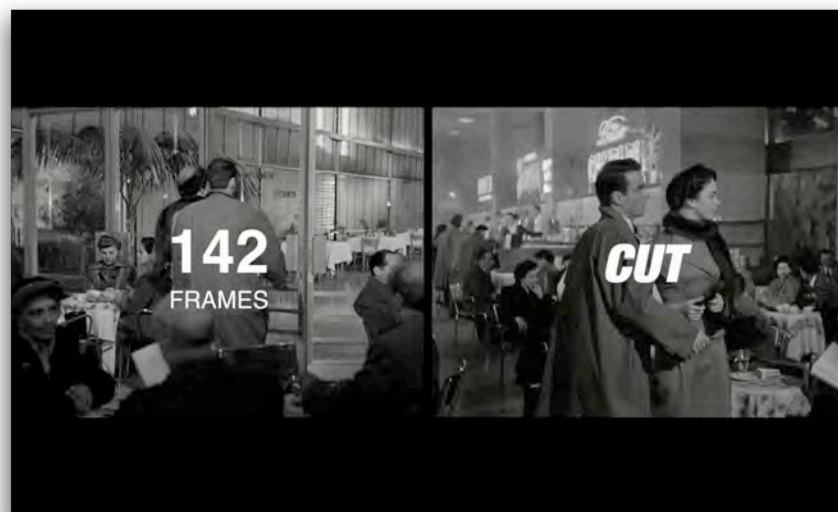


Figure 33: *What is Neorealism?* (::kogonada, 2013)

Christian Keathley has argued that while its comparative purpose ostensibly inscribes *What is Neorealism?* in the audiovisual essay’s explanatory mode, the video also “effectively poeticizes its explanatory elements” (2014). It did so, on the one hand, through ::kogonada’s delivery of the voice-over in a “low, hurried tone,” which conveys the impression that “he’s sharing with us some secret, previously undiscovered, uncanny correspondence between two different films” (Keathley 2014). And on the other hand, through the (as we have already seen in the section about Catherine Grant) exacting perceptual activity imposed on the spectator by the split-screen device:

“The intermittent forward or backward scanning on one of the screens — with one moving image falling behind, then catching up with the other— visualizes the spiraling effect of the uncanny. As one image speeds up or freezes, and the two images separate, our attention intensifies in an effort to see; as the two images unify, our attention relaxes.” (Keathley 2014)

In both instances, we can see that ::kogonada’s *methodological excess* sways the explanatory elements into the poetic mode, making the creative possibilities that emerge from those elements as least as important (if not more) than whatever analytical arguments they might produce. This methodological excess also makes it easier to understand kogonada’s problematic notion that neorealism can be defined by *one* key feature: de Sica’s shown preference for the type of in-between moments in the original version of *Terminal Station*. As Christian Keathley rightly noted, “[t]here is more to neorealism than just one (admittedly relevant) cinematic narrational feature.” (2014) In the video essay *Rejecting Neorealism: Fellini and Antonioni* (2014, 5min), which can be seen as a direct response to *What is Neorealism?*, Kevin B. Lee argued that there are indeed other defining features of neorealism, which can even be in stark contrast to the one selected by ::kogonada (see Lee 2014c).

The motivation for ::kogonada’s choice lies elsewhere. As Keathley also noted, perhaps ::kogonada “focuses on this point because it is what he takes as his model: the neorealist strategy of poeticizing what appears simply to be ‘fact’ or ‘truth’.” (Keathley 2014) In fact, this poeticizing strategy is present in much of ::kogonada’s work, either in the methodological excess of his ostensible mastery of editing, or in his recurrent interest in cinematic representations of time that convey a sense of the finitude and contingency of human existence. The connection between these two elements, which can already be found at work in *What is Neorealism?*, is at the centre of his longer audiovisual essays —such as *The World According to Koreeda Hirokazu* (2013) or *Linklater: On Cinema & Time* (2013).

Digital symphonies: a tautological use of editing

In *The World According to Koreeda Hirokazu* (2013, 9min), after an introductory sequence guided by aural, graphic and action matches, ::kogonada combines audio commentary with sequentially-edited scenes from the Japanese director's films *After Life* (1998), *Maborosi* (1995), *Distance* (2001), and *Nobody Knows* (2004). The commentary is read by ::kogonada himself and is performed in the same low, ceremonial tone of *What is Neorealism?*, also conveying the impression of a mystery being uncovered in secret. Although at times the sequences are reproduced with their original soundtrack and dialogues, for the most part ::kogonada's commentary explains the images and the relations among them. According to the essayist, Koreeda's films often focus on trivial, familiar moments from everyday life, which only gain an added value in a context of death or of physical danger. Many characters thus face a choice between escaping from their lives (either in a literal or figured way), or conforming to them and indulging in the pleasures of those everyday moments that, even if ephemeral, also establish their humanity. According to ::kogonada, Koreeda's films thus enact cinema's own dilemma between offering "escape or deeper entrance into this world," (*The World...* audio commentary) which the Japanese filmmaker resolves in favour of the latter. ::kogonada argues that the choice between escaping and entrance into the world is conveyed by sequences where the characters are in motion. This justifies the only use of a shot from another director, as ::kogonada compares (still using sequential editing) the two "existential runs," similarly framed using long travelling shots of Akira in *Nobody Knows*, and of Antoine Doinel at the end of *The 400 Blows* (François Truffaut, 1959). The characters' choice between fleeing and returning to the world is thus represented in a way that underlines the passage of time, therefore persuading them —or at least, the spectator—, of the inescapable contingency of human existence.



Figure 34: *The World According to Koreeda Hirokazu* (::kogonada, 2013)

It is not difficult to understand why ::kogonada's interest in the cinematic representation of time would translate into a video essay about Richard Linklater, a filmmaker who has always made this issue the subject matter of his films, most bluntly made clear in his most recent *Boyhood* (2014). *Linklater: On Cinema & Time* (2013, 8min) combines sequences mostly taken from the *Before* series⁷⁰ —but also from *It's Impossible to Learn to Plow by Reading Books* (1988), *Slacker* (1991), and *Waking Life* (2011)— with an audio commentary composed of excerpted dialogues from Linklater's films (again, mostly from Ethan Hawke's character in the *Before* series) and extracts from a telephone interview between the director and ::kogonada. An introductory sequence collects shots from all films in which Jean-Pierre Léaud played Antoine Doinel,⁷¹ not only establishing a direct relation with the Koreeda Hirokazu essay (via the common *The 400 Blows* sequence), but also with Linklater's *Before* trilogy, similarly featuring recurrent characters played by the same actors over a long period of time.

The editing of sequences from the different instalments of the *Before* series allows the spectator to confront the characters at different moments in their lives, therefore materializing the “time machine” that Ethan Hawke's character, Jesse, explicitly refers to when he asks Celine (Julie Delpy) to imagine what would happen if they were to spend the rest of their lives together. In his

⁷⁰ *Before Sunrise* (1995), *Before Sunset* (2004), *Before Midnight* (2012).

⁷¹ *The 400 Blows* (François Truffaut, 1959), *Stolen Kisses* (idem, 1968), *Bed & Board* (idem, 1970), *Love on the run* (idem, 1979).

courtship, Jesse engages in endless musings about the inexorable passage of time and the urgency of the ephemeral present, through which he effectively manages to delay Celine's departure. ::kogonada aptly underlines the importance of this topic by adding to the end credits of his video the recording of Dylan Thomas reading of W.H. Auden's poem, "As I Walked Out One Evening", which Jesse reads to Celine at one point: "O let not Time deceive you,/ You cannot conquer time."



Figure 35: *Linklater: On Cinema & Time* (::kogonada, 2013)

Much like ::kogonada's own audio commentary in *The World According to Koreeda Hirokazu*, the tone and axiomatic nature of *Linklater...*'s commentary conveys a "humanist existentialism" based on the discovery, and indeed the epiphanic revelation, that cinema can be manipulated (either by specific filmmakers, or by the audiovisual essayist himself) to illustrate the passing of time. This purpose drives ::kogonada's interest in Ozu's empty hallways, in De Sica's disposable moments, and in Koreeda's and Linklater's even more explicit acknowledgement of how cinema can express the finitude of human existence. In doing so, ::kogonada suggests that cinema speaks directly to each individual's sense of self, as well as to his sense of collective connection to other individuals. This pulp existentialism bears a striking resemblance to the overall tone of *Life in a Day* (Kevin McDonald, 2011), the epitome of digital spectatorship and of the Web 2.0 pathos of *universal connectedness*. A celebration of YouTube's fifth anniversary, the movie edits together footage shot and uploaded by users worldwide during the same pre-determined one-day period (see Macdonald

2011). The combination of the 24-hour cycle with the representation of the entire human life-cycle betrays the obvious source of inspiration of the project, the European and North American “city symphonies” of the late 1920s and early 1930s⁷².

Many formal similarities can be found between Macdonald’s *YouTube symphony* and ::kogonada’s work —the essayist tellingly described *Tempo // Basho* “as a kind of visual symphony” (Macaulay 2014). *Life in a Day* also includes sequences structured by rapid cutting, graphic, aural and action matches, comparable to ::kogonada’s shorter “supercut” videos, and also combines these with slower-paced sequences, comparable again, to ::kogonada’s longer essays. Furthermore, the epiphanic revelations about the contingency of human existence that traverse ::kogonada’s longer essays are also to be found in *Life in a Day*, especially in the final storm sequence, in which a young woman finds solace for her isolation in the understanding that the shooting of her video proves the irreducible *here-and-nowness* of her situation, therefore connecting her to many other people across the planet.



Figure 36: *Linklater: On Cinema & Time* (::kogonada, 2013)

⁷² See Hagener (2007); Hake (2008); and Turvey (2011).



Figure 37: *Life in a Day* (Kevin Macdonald, 2011)

This relation is not coincidental. In an interview, ::kogonada expressed his admiration for *Move* (2002), an Emmy Award television advertisement produced for Nike:

“I was completely overwhelmed by it. I only caught it once and was desperate to see it again. I was eventually able to find a copy, and I've watched it countless times. It's a masterpiece. If it existed today as an online video, I think it would be passed around and celebrated.” (Baldegg 2012)

Move showcases, in fact, many of the strategies that ::kogonada would use in his work, such as a quickly graspable organizing idea (the cutting on action of different people doing sports), the guiding presence of music, an elaborate internal structure that builds up to a climax, the rapid cutting and the graphic and action matches that make its repeated viewing as compelling, and as addictive even, as his own videos.

The director and producers of *Life in a Day* also have a direct link to the advertisement. *Move* was produced by RSA USA, the north-American office of the British film and television advertising company founded in 1968 by Ridley and Tony Scott, who were the producers of *Life in a Day*, and are the father and uncle of Jake Scott, the director of *Move*. The similarities between the work of Jake Scott and *Life in a Day* are not, however, limited to *Move*. The author of many awarded television advertisements and music videos, Jake Scott has recently directed

1.24.14 (2014), commissioned by Apple to celebrate the brand's 30th anniversary, and an obvious wink at RSA's famous 1984 Apple advertisement directed by Ridley Scott. Shot exclusively using iPhones during one day in different locations around the world, 1.24.14 can be seen as a miniaturized homage to *Life in a Day*. The presence of *Life in a Day* strongly resonates, via Jake Scott, in the methodological excess of ::kogonada's supercuts and is clearly articulated in the audio commentaries of his longer, "existentialist" videos. Like *Move* and *Life in a Day*, ::kogonada's essays are also organised to showcase the author's exhibitionist use of editing, which might explain why they often feel like a *showreel* compilation of a filmmaker's best cinematography and editing achievements. In doing so, ::kogonada reduces editing to a combinatory game of shapes, sounds, and movements that, like *Life in a Day*, level the differences between shots and convey an impression of endless *continuity* and *sameness*. (The most shocking example of this might be the use of a shot that shows a suicide in ::kogonada's *Wes Anderson // From Above* to illustrate a type of framing and, in even poorer taste, to announce the "end" of the video.)

Similarly to *Life in a Day*, ::kogonada's editing strategies have a *tautological effect* whereby the same fact is repeated with variations that obscure the lack of a rationale that would support their approximation. In both instances, the tautological use of editing produces an impression of *connectedness* —of cinematic elements, and of the individuals represented — that downplays *difference* in favour of *sameness*. Editing becomes, here, the exact opposite of montage because ::kogonada's audiovisual essays, much like *Life in a Day* before them, *hide* at least as much as they *reveal*. What they show is not so much the illustration of a previously defined argument or filmic analysis (as in David Bordwell's case), nor a record of the process of exploration of a given cinematic issue (Catherine Grant). ::kogonada's videos can best be described, rather, as a record and a celebration of a purely *gestural use of editing*, that is, of the pleasures, rather than the knowledge, associated with the digital viewing and editing of moving images and sounds. In this form of *vernacular montage*, of which the supercut and the GIF-effect are the paradigmatic climaxes, editing becomes a celebration of the abundance of moving images and sounds that levels

the existing differences between them for the sake of the superficial relations of continuity that can playfully and skilfully be established across them.

However, and unlike, for example, Catherine Grant and Christian Keathley, there is no personal investment in this practice of the audiovisual essay, or at least, not one that has been explicitly expressed. On the contrary, ::kogonada's use of a 'moniker' reinforces the impersonal demonstration of the power of editing already conveyed by his methodological excesses. In this way, ::kogonada's videos *naturalize* the epistemological potential of editing, hiding it, as it were, in plain sight. The more flamboyant his use of editing, the greater the impression of sameness it conveys; in consequence, the less inclined we seem to be to consider the technological, economic, cultural conditions of production of those images, and what they represent.

::kogonada's work illustrates not only the proximity between the digital audiovisual essay and popular cultural forms —such as the supercut, or television advertising— but also the consequences of this proximity. First, it makes clear how the digital audiovisual essay has been fertilized by those cultural forms, and specifically by their a-critical use of editing. Secondly, this filiation highlights how the audiovisual essay can also exemplify the much wider dissemination of vernacular, domesticated forms of montage, across the cultural forms and viewing situations that populate contemporary audiovisual culture. While ::kogonada undoubtedly welcomes the creative critical possibilities of new editing and viewing technologies, his audiovisual essays thoroughly enact the ideological functions of contemporary audiovisual culture. On the one hand, the methodological excess of his videos must be seen as an inoculation of the spectator against the epistemological and critical powers of editing. On the other hand, his tautological use of editing helps to establish fragmentation as the most productive way of analysing audiovisual texts, and their representation of the world, thus disavowing the totality of social, economic and cultural relations governing the production, circulation, and reception of those texts. For a practice of the audiovisual essay that, on the contrary, strives to highlight those same relations, we must now turn to Kevin B. Lee.

3.4. Kevin B. Lee: desktop cinema

Kevin B. Lee's work displays all the key features of the digital audiovisual essay: an interest in auteurs or mainstream filmmakers that prolongs and probes Lee's own spectatorial experiences (and to a lesser degree, his own biography); the apt use of digital editing technologies in a way that underlines the essay as an on-going process with an open methodology; the collaborative and dialogical modes of production and reception; the production of written articles that accompany the publication of the videos; the combined use of audiovisual and verbal-based elements in the videos themselves; the use of the form in a pedagogical context, both as a student *and* as a teacher⁷³.

Furthermore, one can say that Lee's work combines the poetic stance of savvy editing and the thematic interest in individual filmmakers and their use of specific film techniques, such as one finds in ::kogonada's videos, with the explanatory and pedagogical stances of Bordwell's video lectures, and the methodological experimentation and the desire to document and investigate her own spectatorial experiences that characterise Grant's videos. But if Lee's essays might be considered exemplary of the form's methodological diversity, they also distinguish him from most of the other essayists. Unlike his peers, Lee has explicitly adopted a tone of prudent suspicion about the critical potential of the digital audiovisual essay, or at least of some uses of the form. Lee has expressed his worries about whether the audiovisual essay might be just another way of stimulating the consumption of digitally mediated audiovisual culture. These concerns were the specific focus of his video *The Essay Film: Some Thoughts of Discontent* (2013), but are present throughout much of his more recent videographic and written work, either as a topic or as a method. Entirely absent in Bordwell and ::kogonada, these concerns are only implicitly addressed by Grant's continuous methodological experimentation. Lee's move towards *desktop cinema* will directly address this issue by explicitly integrating the double logic of remediation in the formal structure of his videos. By simultaneously transforming the frame into an opaque screen *and* a transparent window, his

⁷³ The happy, unfinished stage of filmic analysis, that of the classroom environment, is even the subject of one of Lee's audiovisual essays (*Lessons in looking*, 2014), see Introduction.

videos will invite the viewer to weight in the critical possibilities of the audiovisual essay with its role as an enhanced form of consumption of contemporary moving images. For these reasons, this case study is also a synthesis of the main argument of the dissertation —and hence its discussion will be longer than that of previous case studies—, because Lee’s work encapsulates so neatly the ambiguous relation to mass culture that digital audiovisual culture inherits from modernism, while at the same time challenging the ideological functions of the digital audiovisual essay and its complicity with capitalism.

Online film criticism: an endless apprenticeship

By December 2014, Kevin B. Lee had made over 200 digital audiovisual essays. Many of these have been commissioned by *Sight & Sound*’s website, the online magazine *Keyframe* (of which Lee was the founding editor and is now the “chief video essayist”), the blogs *Film in Focus Rewatch Series*, *The Moving Image Source*, *The Auteurs Notebook*, *Reverse Shot*, and Lee’s own *Shooting Down Pictures* blog. Like ::kogonada, and other audiovisual essayists discussed above, Lee’s work has also been the focus of scholarly articles and online curatorship. Lee himself has written about his work, either in short notes accompanying the online publication of his videos or in longer, autonomous articles. With a background in filmmaking and editing, Lee also worked as supervising producer for the TV show “Ebert Presents at the Movies” and is the founding partner of dGenerate films, a company specialized in the distribution of independent Chinese cinema in North-America. He wrote film reviews for *Sight & Sound*, *The Chicago Sun Times*, *The New York Times*, *Slate* and *Indiewire*. His activity as a film critic is now on hold as he completes a MFA in Film Video New Media and Animation and an MA in Visual and Critical Studies at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Lee’s most recent project, *Transformers: The Premake* (2014) generated several thousands of online views (over 36.000 views on YouTube in December 2014), drew attention from the mainstream press, was selected for international film festivals in Europe and the United States, and was

even considered for a possible 2015 Oscar nomination in the Best Short Documentary category, an unusual series of accomplishments for a film originally released on YouTube.

His interest and earliest experiments with the audiovisual essay emerged in the context of a “typically obsessive cinephile project” (Lee 2009). Between 2007 and 2008, he finished the “1.000 Greatest Movies of All Times,” a list updated yearly by Bill Georgaris in the website *They Shoot Pictures, Don't They?*⁷⁴ Which is drawn from the compilation of over 1.900 lists and polls by critics, filmmakers and scholars. Lee's blog, *Shooting Down Pictures*⁷⁵ was created as a way to “savor the experience of watching these movies, one at a time,” (Lee 2014a) instead of sprinting towards the completion of the list. For each film he watched, Lee wrote a review, compiled quotes and links to articles and video extracts available online. As he moved down the list, he “felt the urge to comment directly on some of these clips, or to combine [his] reflections on the film with clips to directly illustrate [his] observations.” (Lee 2009) Lee's practice of the audiovisual essay can thus be seen as a way to both *extend* and *investigate* the pleasures of his cinephile experiences. His entry trajectory into the form is a perfect example of how the affordances of digital viewing and editing technologies foster the combination of the figures of the *possessive* and *pensive* spectators that characterizes the audiovisual essayist. Much in the sense already described by Grant, Lee sees his work as a record of his digitally-mediated encounters with films, as much as about the films themselves:

“What's perhaps most instructive about these videos is that, in a sense, they are less about the films than about *how we watch films*, which is a creative act in itself. These videos are a testament to the viewer as creator, a mostly private activity that these videos carry into a public discourse.” (Lee 2009; my emphasis)

Like the work of many of his colleagues, Lee's essays can be seen as the literal demonstration of how viewing can be a creative and critical act that lends collective, public relevance to individual, intimate cinephile experiences. In order

⁷⁴ <http://www.theyshootpictures.com/>

⁷⁵ <http://alsolikelife.com/shooting/>

to do this, he also continuously experiments with different methods and film techniques in an attempt to replicate his spectatorial experiences. The videos he made for the *Shooting Down Pictures* project demonstrate this point vehemently and extensively. Some videos focus on a single sequence, a performance, or the music of a film, others on its sociological context, and others, still, serve as a pretext for an autobiographical reflection. Lee uses text inserts, voice over commentary (either by himself or, most often, by invited critics, scholars, and filmmakers), and he alters the speed and direction of the film's motion to either "linger on a moment and dig into all of its compositional and thematic implications" or "convey its duration" (Lee 2009). Also, and in stark contrast to other essayists, Lee further comments on the film either by *shooting original footage*, or by *using pre-existent images* of an event connected to the film (be it archival footage, or images available online), therefore tapping directly into both the *essay film* and the *found footage* traditions (although at this point in a more intuitive than referential way). To some extent, this is the result of his collaborations with numerous film scholars, filmmakers, veteran film critics and members of the online cinephile community, and their different sensibilities and idiosyncrasies. According to Lee, while some authors had prepared written scripts, others preferred to improvise their observations; and some would specify which clips they wanted to include, whereas others left the editing options entirely up to Lee (2009). But Lee actively sought methodological diversity, stating that he dreaded the idea of repeating himself and that he tried to imitate the style of the filmmakers whose films he analysed (Lee 2009). This approach points to the academic fine-arts convention of learning by copying the work of the canonical great masters, and is in consonance with the audiovisual essayist's preference for auteur cinema. More importantly, it should remind us that the digital audiovisual essay is fundamentally a *self-taught form* with, what is more, no predetermined method. Even in the case of someone who, like Lee, had a background in editing, the engagement with the form has necessarily meant continuous experimentation, and much trial and error. It is therefore possible to interpret his videos for the *Shooting Down Pictures* project as a *formative* process in which, through *continuous methodological experimentation*, Lee systematically confronts himself with the expressive potential of different

film techniques and their specific uses by individual filmmakers. The most far-reaching outcome of this formative process was not, however, the progressive grasp of a pre-determined method, but rather the understanding that the practice of the digital audiovisual essay is an *endless apprenticeship*. This is not unlike Catherine Grant's (and many other essayists') suggestion that the form is defined by its methodological openness and, hence, by unremitting exploration. Lee's work, in my view, illustrates this point rather poignantly, while also drawing attention to how these two issues reinforce and feed off each other: the practice of continuous experimentation consolidates the theoretical notion of the form's open, un-programmed methodology, which in turn stimulates further practical experimentation, and so on, in what becomes a potentially endless cycle.

Apart from this formative aspect, Lee's earlier videos also showcased the *collaborative* and *dialogical* elements of the digital audiovisual essay. His engagement with so many authors, easily reached by email and the social media, testifies to the curiosity generated by the form since its early years, while also testing different forms of collaborative authorship open to the audiovisual essay. This aspect helped shape the form as a product of the Web 2.0, not only because Lee's collaborative videos revealed and reinforced existing online networks of cinephilia and film criticism, but also because they were shared in this context, via his blog and YouTube channel. Furthermore, because this vast array of collaborators shared and commented on Lee's *Shooting Down Pictures*, the videos also contributed to establishing his own popularity, and more importantly, of the (then in 2007 emergent) digital audiovisual essay in general, across a wide range of contexts, from online film criticism to filmmaking and academia.

Lee's essays would gain an increasing sophistication, not only from a technical, but also a rhetorical point of view. In late 2011, he became one of the founding members of, and contributors to, *Keyframe*, the daily online magazine of the cinema news aggregator website *Fandor*. Lee contributed dozens of video essays to *Keyframe*, ranging from individual film reviews, the annual best-of round-ups, or his very popular Oscar nomination predictions. Most of these videos were created in the strict context of online film criticism, motivated by the

calendar of film releases and of the international film festival circuit. While they also focus on mainstream cinema, these videos are more often directed at art and world cinema, and documentary films. Their auteurist approach aims to inform cinephiles about worthy film discoveries, to provide them with background on a filmmaker and to offer value judgments on individuals films, as much as to inscribe those films in an author's oeuvre or in the history of a genre, aesthetic movement, or national tradition. While some videos would take the form of film reviews, with an audio commentary read over a sequential editing of a film's (or group of films') highlights, others have a longer duration and a more complex structure, signalling the beginning of Lee's progressive detachment from the film criticism model and the investigation of his spectatorial experiences in favour of a more critical and self-conscious engagement with the digital audiovisual essay and with the economy (and the politics) of contemporary audiovisual culture in general.

The Spielberg Face (2011) is a 9-minute-long video, produced on the occasion of the almost simultaneous release, in December 2011, of two Spielberg films —*The Adventures of Tintin* and *War Horse*. In this audiovisual essay, Lee identifies and analyses what, in his view, is Spielberg's most emblematic type of shot, the "Spielberg face": a combination of close-up and forward dolly movement used to depict the protagonists' moments of awe. Lee's essay argues that this shot can already be found in the history of cinema, but that Spielberg used it systematically as a "signature shot," which, in turn, was appropriated by many other contemporary Hollywood action films. The essay further extends the argument that the shot's relevance goes beyond Spielberg's cinema by suggesting that the "Spielberg face" mimics, as much as it cues, the surrender of the spectator to Hollywood's spectacular action cinema (and not just to this director's films, in particular). Lee establishes this point when he discusses how Spielberg's use of his signature shot changed after 9/11. Here, he argues in the audio commentary, "the Spielberg face is an expression of trauma in a world of perpetual danger." But, he continues, Spielberg went even further and eventually deconstructed the shot's function. Using the example of *Artificial Intelligence: AI* (2001), Lee notes how in this case the robot boy's default expression is the "Spielberg face," thus exposing its constructed nature and its purpose of

manipulating everybody who interacts with it; and, consequentially, exposing cinema's similar purpose of manipulating the spectators' emotional responses as well.



Figure 38: Three frames from *The Spielberg Face* (Kevin B. Lee, 2011)

The Spielberg Face's auteurist approach is, then, merely a starting point to a different type of analysis. Like ::kogonada, for example, Lee chooses a film technique whose recurrence transforms it into a stylistic signature. Unlike ::kogonada, however, Lee also addresses the *changes* and even the *contradictions* in Spielberg's use of this device and, what is more, its relevance beyond his cinema and his particular directorial style. To Lee, a stylistic signature such as the "Spielberg face" is not the object of his essay, but rather the entry point into a discussion about how contemporary Hollywood action cinema manipulates the emotions of the spectator. In a striking analytical inversion, Lee subverts the *inward* movement towards character psychology and spectator identification traditionally created by the close up and turns it into an *outward* movement that

reflects back to cinema itself —the face is no longer the window to the human soul, but to cinema's industrial nature instead.

The argumentative complexity and wider interpretative scope of Lee's work is also noticeable, and is indeed enhanced, by his choice and employment of formal strategies. Once again, the comparison with the work of ::kogonada is instructive. Instead of a tautological supercut of "Spielberg faces," Lee's argument is presented via the combined use of audio commentary and different editing techniques, which not only identify the usual form of this signature shot, but also the variations in its use by the director, therefore making it less the object of cumulative praise than of analytical investigation. If one watches *The Spielberg Face* with the sound off, it looks rather like a supercut, albeit one lacking the sense of rhythm provided by ::kogonada's elegant matching cuts. Lee's chosen shots have very different durations, they are grouped according to the film they were extracted from, and are accompanied by captions that identify all the movie titles. Other rhetorical uses of editing include the isolation of blocks of shots through fades and black frames, multiple-screen comparisons that emphasise the repeated use the Spielberg-face in a single film or across a series of films, and halts in the flow of the essay using freeze frames, reverse motion and quick cutting. These editing strategies accompany and highlight the arguments presented by the audio commentary, which in itself further contributes to the overall argumentative tone of the essay. Unlike ::kogonada, Lee's commentary is delivered in a less declamatory, much more casual and informative style, and the text itself is quite scholarly, in the sense that it makes extensive use of the vocabulary of film analysis and is directed at its traditional objects (in this particular case, scale of shot and camera movement).

While the voice-over could probably be presented as an autonomous written text, it is nevertheless intimately linked to this particular form of editing moving images. The images are certainly edited so as to accompany and highlight the text, dramatizing, as it were, its key moments and arguments. However, the commentary does not blanket the images; far from it, in many instances they are left to stand on their own, the audiovisual echo or anticipation of a particular (vocal) argument. In these moments, the volume of the original music soundtrack of the films is turned up and the footage is allowed room "to speak

for itself, which allows the video to breathe” (Lee 2009). In this way, *The Spielberg Face* is already a perfect example of Lee’s metaphorical association of audio commentary with the breathing movement of inhalation, and of movies’ extracts with exhalation that would characterise his later works (Lee 2009). Lee’s understanding (and employment) of these two elements as interdependent is certainly responsible for the reception of *The Spielberg Face* as a synthesis of the explanatory and poetic modes of the video essay (Stork 2012b). From Matthias Stork’s perspective, Lee’s arguments in this video essay result from a combination of the voice-over with the appropriated moving images that allow him to “not merely speak about the filmic subject,” but also to speak “through it.” (Stork 2012b) Stork also makes the important point that Lee’s style is “inherently Spielbergian,” or at least that it is “at its strongest when it exploits the malleability of the digital image, juxtaposing analogous displays of the Spielbergian close-up and allowing them to seamlessly flow into one another.” (Stork 2012b) This comment speaks directly to my previous suggestion that Lee’s experimentation of the video essay is intimately connected to the imitation or the repetition of a specific stylistic trait as part of a learning process concerning cinema.

Lee’s approach must be understood beyond the cinephile compulsion to track an auteur’s individual style, so compellingly (but also so misleadingly) translated by the tautological supercuts that suggest that sheer accumulation is already a form of analysis. Lee’s interest in a recurrent formal element must also be inscribed in the tradition of film analysis developed by the digital audiovisual essay. As he strove to re-enact the choices of a filmmaker in order to better understand them, the process taught him something, not only about a specific auteur or film technique, but ultimately about cinema itself. His work would thus progressively show the similarities that exist between the academic and cinephile practices of the audiovisual essay.

Visualization: the spatialization of montage

In many of his audiovisual essays after *The Spielberg Face*, Lee adopted a progressively more critical and self-conscious tone (which, as we have seen, is not entirely absent from that video's analysis of Hollywood cinema's cueing of the emotional responses of the spectators). This tendency was further reiterated after 2013, when Lee interrupted his work as a film critic in order to engage with cinema in the context of the university, therefore removing himself from the intensive rhythms of film reviewing and the demanding consumption cycles of cinema (Lee 2014b). The reflexive tone of the essays he produced during this (still on-going) period is translated in the inclusion of different techniques of *cultural analytics* and *visualization* of the audiovisual text in the very structure of his videos. This intermediary step would eventually lead to the more recent development of a method he has described as "desktop cinema," whose employment of specific editing and compositional strategies to literally express the double logic of remediation, will question the limitations and the benevolence of the digital audiovisual essay's epistemological potential. An early example of this can be found in Lee's *Steadicam Progress: The Career of Paul Thomas Anderson in Five Shots* (9min), made in 2012 for the *Sight & Sound* website. The essay examines the functions of this type of shot in five of Anderson's films, focussing especially on the dynamism introduced by the camera movement (either quick or slow) and the establishment of single or multiple points of attention for the viewer. In contrast to the "Spielberg face," Lee is not suggesting that the steadicam is Anderson's signature shot. Quite the opposite, it is his exceptional use of this filmic device that, from Lee's point of view, makes it an interesting object of analysis. The essay has a strict, repetitive structure. After the initial credits, each shot is presented first in the form of an overhead diagram in full frame; then, a multiple-screen shows both the shot and its corresponding diagram, in which a small icon tracks the progress of the camera. The original soundtrack is tuned down in favour of a voice-over written and delivered by Lee himself. In each case, a different function of the steadicam shot is brought to the fore: character development in *Hard Eight* (1996), a festive

atmosphere in *Boogie Nights* (1997), overall anxiety in *Magnolia* (1999), individual harassment in *Punch-Drunk Love* (2002), and contained tension in *There Will be Blood* (2007). At the same time, Lee notes how the technique ranges from a tension between a panoramic and linear viewing experience (in the first four examples) to the presence of multiple fixed centres of attention (in *There Will Be Blood*). To argue his point that the existence of multiple points of attention in *There Will Be Blood* stands in contrast to Anderson's previous use of a single point of focus throughout the shot, Lee uses the Dynamic Images and Eye Movement (DIEM) project's analysis of this particular shot. The analysis consists of tracking the eye movements of several viewers to locate what they were looking at inside the frame, and then superimposing a graphical representation of that information on the original moving image⁷⁶. In 2011, David Bordwell and Tim Smith had already performed a DIEM analysis of this shot for the same purpose, that is, to argue that in spite of the absence of editing, Anderson still managed to guide viewer attention through compositional techniques and "by co-opting natural biases in our attention [such as] our sensitivity to faces, hands, and movement." (Smith 2011)



Figure 39: A shot from *Hard Eight* (P.T. Anderson, 1996) in *Steadicam Progress: The Career of Paul Thomas Anderson in Five Shots* (Kevin B. Lee, 2012)

⁷⁶ See the DIEM Project website (<http://thediemproject.wordpress.com/>), and Chávez Heras (2012).



Figure 40: DIEM analysis of a shot from *There Will Be Blood* (P.T. Anderson, 2007) in *Steadicam Progress: The Career of Paul Thomas Anderson in Five Shots* (Kevin B. Lee, 2012)

DIEM is hardly as popular as Cinemetrics, another cultural analytics tool that allows for the calculation of a film's average shot length (ASL), as well as the quantification of different scales of shot.⁷⁷ The series of data produced by Cinemetrics and most cultural analytics tools with graphical representations of collected data are still useful even if they are not directly associated with the moving images that produced them. They exist and “speak” instead of the film, presenting conclusions that could not have been drawn from a linear, one-time viewing experience. That is not the case with the DIEM project. In fact, DIEM's recorded data would be useless if it could not be represented in conjunction with the images that originated it: “dissociated from the image that prompted the eye movements in the first place, the gathered data could not serve its intended purpose, namely, to *show* the gaze's fixation points.” (Chávez Heras 2012)

A similar principle now guides most digital editing programs, the fundamental tools of audiovisual essayists. Here, too, the iconic representation of a (digitized version of a) film *co-exists* with its graphical representation as a spatial arrangement of information. The individual shots are perceived as a series of simultaneously presented *thumbnails*; the image and even the sound

⁷⁷ See the project's website, <http://www.cinemetrics.lv>. Cinemetrics was founded by Iuri Tsivian and Gunars Civjans in 2005. See also Frederick Broderick's version of Cinemetrics: <http://cinemetrics.fredericbrodbeck.de>. Kevin B. Lee also wrote about Cinemetrics: see (Lee 2014d).

tracks are represented as a series of bars, with different lengths and colours, organized across space in a *timeline*; and the *preview windows* instantly translate all this spatially organized information back into moving images and sounds.



Figure 41: The graphical user interface of Apple's Final Cut Pro X

Digital viewing and editing software therefore seems to make tangible and visible the *spatialization* of audiovisual texts that Lev Manovich identified as one of the consequences of digital (and more specifically, of computerised) forms of mediation (Manovich 2002, 157). This mode of visualizing and producing moving images has also influenced their formal composition, as Sérgio Dias Branco (2008) has argued in his analysis of the “mosaic-screen” (not to be confused with the split-screen), a popular form of multiple-frame organization in contemporary television, the music video, as well as in some feature films.

The spatial dimension of editing that graphical visualization allows is the precondition and the constitutive method of the audiovisual essay—one of the most “productive points of contact” across the practice of the digital audiovisual essay (Grant 2012)—, having become the object and the central formal principle shaping many of them. In *V2/Variation on the Sunbeam* (2011, 10min), for example, Aitor Gametxo distributed most of the shots of D.W. Griffith’s 1912 *The Sunbeam* across a screen divided in 6 individual frames. Here, temporally *successive* shots became spatially *simultaneous*, and relations of *suggested spatial*

contiguity became relations between *literally contiguous frames*⁷⁸. The argument about Griffith's use of lateral staging receives here a very eloquent visual confirmation.



Figure 42: *V2/Variation on the Sunbeam* (Aitor Gametxo, 2011)

Kevin B. Lee has further experimented with the visualization affordances of digital editing software, specifically with the *thumbnail*, the *timeline* and the *preview window*. In some of his most recent work, these elements became central, structuring principles of his essays, and play a transitional role towards the explicit representation of the double logic of remediation that would shape his “desktop cinema” method. In *Andrei Tarkovsky's Cinematic Candles* (2014, 9min), Lee undertakes what we could describe as an audiovisual variation of ASL analysis. Instead of simply noting the duration and scale of each shot in Tarkovsky's *Nostalgia* (1983), Lee simultaneously presents all the individual shots of that film in a single screen. The pretext for this mode of presentation comes from *Nostalgia's* emblematic 9-minute long take of the protagonist carrying a candle. “What if we saw each of the 123 shots in *Nostalgia* as a candle flickering with cinematic life until it goes out?” Lee suggests (2014e). This emblematic shot structures Lee's audiovisual essay, which is also 9 minutes long. As the video progresses and the shorter shots come to an end, Lee periodically presents Tarkovsky's longer shot in full frame so he can then return to a spatial

⁷⁸ Gametxo is a film studies student from Barcelona. His essay received wide attention from film scholars and bloggers; see Groo (2012) and Grant (2012).

re-organization of the remaining shots. In this way, the final five minutes of the essay are a split-screen of the remaining two shots, and the final four minutes show the last one in full frame. Uncannily, the last shot's forward zoom, until the candle occupies the entire frame, seems to continue Lee's progressive *immersion* to the film, as much as it reiterates the comparison of a *shot* to a *candle* that motivates this video.



Figure 43: Andrei Tarkovsky's *Cinematic Candles* (Kevin B. Lee, 2014)

The spatial visualization of the duration of every shot in *Nostalgia* reveals two surprises to Lee, which the video only suggests (there is no voice-over) but that are clearly articulated in an accompanying note (Lee 2014e). First, the discovery that “[t]here’s a kind of mathematical pattern to the reduction of shot lengths, with half the shots eliminated by each minute mark.” (Lee 2014e) This discovery is aptly underscored by Lee’s periodical return to the 9-minute-long take, shown in full screen every minute. The other discovery results from the spatial arrangement of the 123 shots, organized chronologically from the top to the bottom of the frame: “You’ll notice that the early shots of the film [in the top] are distinctly darker than the later shots [in the bottom]. The color and brightness of the film’s visual design gradually moves from darkness to light, following its protagonist’s search for enlightenment.” (Lee 2014e) Both ‘discoveries’ result from a spatial organization of the shot that directly relates to the thumbnail mode of presentation of a film in most editing software tools. In these tools, thumbnail images are shorthand for each shot of a film, or even for

entire films stored in a video library. *Cinematic Candles* complicates this analogy because it presents us, as it were, with ‘animated thumbnails’ that are radically different from all other forms of static, serial visualization of a film —such as the standard thumbnail libraries in digital editing tools.

Lee’s ‘animated thumbnails’ transform, once again, the temporal dimension of editing into a *spatial arrangement of visual information*; instead of using memory to compare *successive shots*, one can simply compare *contiguous thumbnails*. This spatial arrangement of a film stimulates comparisons that may hold, or course, important revelatory lessons for the audiovisual essayist. Catherine Grant, for example, had already made this point when she commented that she became aware of similarities between two films only “after seeing thumbnail images from the chosen sequences juxtaposed in my video editor project library.” (Grant 2013) But while the different elements of the editing software might have been used as a research tool to compare different shots and films, they had not previously constituted, to my knowledge, such a striking model for the formal organization of an entire audiovisual essay. What is more, the inclusion of these elements puts the emphasis on the act of creating (new) meaning (through the ostensibly visible manipulation of a spatialized version of the moving image), rather than on the somewhat problematic notion that the audiovisual essay simply revealed some hidden, pre-existent meaning⁷⁹.

In *Manakamana Mergings* (2014, 5min), another element of the editing software is foregrounded: the *preview window*. Here, the result of the combination of different image and soundtracks can be tested. If the timeline includes several image tracks and if these tracks are made to coincide, the result is a superimposition of the different moving images in the preview window. *Manakamana* is a 2013 documentary, directed by Stephanie Spray and Pacho Velez, structured as a series of 11 complete cable car rides over a Nepalese mountain valley. As Lee rightly notes, if “[m]ost amusement park rides overwhelm you in sensory overload; this one brings you back to your senses.” (Lee 2014i) In fact, *Manakamana*’s exclusive use of fixed, long takes, stimulates

⁷⁹ Catherine Grant, for example, has suggested that visualization methods can be seen as the “not so distant digital relative of Walter Benjamin’s ‘unconscious optics’: the idea that the invisible is present inside the visible, and can be revealed using new forms of technology” (2012).

the viewer to find the “small shifts in the passengers’ facial expressions and body movements, in the landscape behind them” (Lee 2014i). It is this spectatorial experience that Lee’s audiovisual essay investigates.



Figure 44: *Manakamana Mergings* (Kevin B. Lee, 2014)

While all the rides are different, Lee identified four sets of shots that seemed to be filmed using the same camera positions. Using both *superimpositions* and the *flicker technique* (i.e., alternating frames), Lee overlays the similar positions to compare the passengers and their behaviours. From a technical point of view, the fusions produced by both techniques result from the alignment of each individual shot in the editing tool timeline. The systematic co-existence of multiple shots makes it impossible to forget the editing mediation that makes this new, merged image, possible. In other words, *Mergings...* draws our attention to the constructed nature of the moving image and specifically to its nature as the result of a process of manipulation through a digital editing tool. It is in this sense that the *Mergings...* screen seems to match what we see in that preview window, as if we —the spectators— were looking over Lee’s shoulder when he was editing his essay.

Finally, in *Three Movies in One: Who is Dayani Cristal?* (2014, 3min) Lee makes the most explicit use of the visualization elements afforded by digital editing technologies. In this audiovisual essay, we are literally *looking over Lee’s shoulder* as the frame is taken over by the computer window of his editing software. The direct representation of that window exposes the relation between

the preview window and the timeline that is implied in *Manakamana Mergings*. *Three Movies in One...* analyses the narrative structure of *Who is Dayani Cristal* (Marc Silver, 2014), a documentary that traces the journey of a migrant worker who died in the desert trying to enter the United States. This analysis is carried out by the sequential re-editing of the original film and its finer points are conveyed by the accompanying voice-over. According to Lee, *Who is Dayani Cristal* combines three different storylines, each one with a distinct setting, plot, and style. First, there is the “footage of border patrolmen, doctors and immigration officials in Arizona, each doing their part to investigate the identity of the body,” that “have the cool, procedural quality of a forensic crime movie or TV show”. (Lee 2014h) Then we have the story of a “family in Honduras whose father has migrated to the U.S., seeking work to better support them” (Lee 2014h), which is filmed in “warm, communal tones, creating a sympathetic portrait of a family with a missing member”(Lee 2014h). And finally, the sequences showing actor Gael Garcial Bernal personally re-enacting the long journey presumably undertaken by the dead migrant worker, that “have the feel of an adventure movie, bringing a heroic quality to our perception of Latino migrant laborers” (Lee 2014h) and putting a empathetic human face to a dramatic social issue, and to the personal tragedy of one such migrant.

After introducing his argument through a combination of shots from each storyline, Lee stresses the point further by showing the editing software window of the computer where he analysed the film. The autonomy of each storyline is visually represented by three separate image tracks in the timeline of Lee’s editing software, Adobe “Premiere Pro”. Each of them, Lee argues, could form a separate movie. As the voice-over enumerates and describes each storyline again, we can see the individual image tracks being selected by a hovering arrow, the trace of Lee’s mouse movements. Lee then continues to argue that, in spite of the autonomy of each storyline (both in terms of plot, setting, and style), individually they would not provide the proper context for what happened to Dayani. When the voice-over goes on to suggest that it is only the combination of the three storylines into “one interlinking narrative chain” (Lee 2014h) that achieves this purpose, a dissolve reintegrates the three image tracks back into a single one. And once more, we can see the hovering arrow —that is, the

reminder of Lee’s presence as the physical and intellectual author of the audiovisual essay— going over the re-unified timeline/movie and thus playing of the corresponding moving images in the preview window above.



Figure 45: Three timelines, merged into one. Two frames from *Three Movies in One: Who is Dayani Cristal?* (Kevin B. Lee, 2014)

The “Premiere Pro” sequence extends for a little less than a third of the video’s total duration, but it does play, in my perspective, a decisive role in enhancing Lee’s argument and our understanding of the film’s narrative structure. Namely, it improves our understanding of how seemingly stylistically disparate sequences contribute to the film’s overall purpose of documenting and contextualizing all the social, political, economic, and intimate dimensions of the life and the death of this individual. But this video is equally —if not more—telling as far as the methods of the *digital* audiovisual essay are concerned. *Three*

Movies in One... is, after all, organized around the *representation of the editing software* that allows not only Lee's analysis of the original movie, but also the production of the audiovisual essay itself. This formal device vividly illustrates the *gestural* use of editing that results from the *visualization* and the *manipulation of spatially arranged moving images*. On the one hand, we have the moment of analytical deconstruction of the original film, that is, the revelation that three movies coexist inside one; and, on the other hand, there's the reconstruction moment, in which the three movies are reintegrated back into one complex narrative structure. The *figuration* of the editing software is, then, nothing more than the acknowledgement of the constant presence of the act of editing throughout the different stages of the essaying process: editing —and the use of this digital editing software in particular— is the tool that renders possible not only the analytical investigation, but also its completion and public presentation. If the formal structure of *Cinematic Candles...* and *Manakamana Mergings* was directly inspired by graphic visualization elements of contemporary digital editing software such as the thumbnail, the timeline or the preview window, *Three Movies in One...* literally places those elements —and, in fact, the very software interface— at the centre of the essay. This reflexive strategy does not mean, however, that the presentation of moving images from the original films is abandoned. On the contrary, the use of graphical visualization devices *co-exists* with the iconic representation of the moving image: the abstract timeline and the thumbnail libraries are *spatially contiguous* with the preview window. The audiovisual essay frame can then become both opaque and transparent, both a window to the iconic representation of the world and a screen that foregrounds the digitally mediated nature of contemporary moving images. In short, these videos already enact the double logic of remediation, whose exploration Lee would undertake systematically in his “desktop” audiovisual essays.

Desktop cinema

Lee first used the term “desktop cinema,” or “desktop documentary,” in the context of *Transformers: The Premake* (2014, 25min), his longest audiovisual essay to date, and also the one most widely viewed and discussed. The video’s accompanying notes, published in the website of Lee’s production company Alsolifeline, offer a definition of this filmmaking method:

“Desktop documentary is an emerging form of filmmaking developed at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago by faculty artists such as Nick Briz, Jon Satrom and Jon Cates, and students such as myself, Yuan Zheng and Blair Bogin. This form of filmmaking treats the computer screen as both a camera lens and a canvas, tapping into its potential as an artistic medium. If the documentary genre is meant to capture life’s reality, then desktop recording acknowledges that computer screens and the Internet are now a primary experience of our daily lives, as well as a primary repository of information. Desktop documentary seeks to both depict and question the ways we explore the world through the computer screen.” (Lee 2014b)

Desktop cinema acknowledges the central role of the personal computer and digital communication networks in the mediation of contemporary audiovisual culture and, accordingly, elects the computer’s graphical interface as the chief formal principle of the audiovisual essay. In a desktop documentary, the screen is filled with the successive and simultaneous accumulation of windows from different software programs —such as editing tools, word processors, internet browsers, multimedia players, e-mail and instant messaging applications. Making a desktop audiovisual essay implies the “recording” of the performative gestures associated with the manipulation of several programs, windows, and frames. It denotes not only the use of a desktop computer, but also the use of the computer’s desktop as the principle of formal organization of audiovisual information. In other words, this method welcomes the role of the computer both as a *research* and *filmmaking* tool, and integrates the two activities in the editing and composition strategies of the audiovisual essay. Desktop filmmaking is, therefore, and as Lee noted, an experience with striking

similarities to the everyday exploration of the world through the computer screen. Desktop cinema not only depicts this form of digital mediation, but also questions the role —that is, the possibilities, but also the limits—, of such a mediation.

The term “desktop documentary” is now widespread and is generally associated with DIY culture and the possibility of using affordable cameras and computers to shoot, edit and distribute a film. The website *Desktop Documentaries*⁸⁰ is a good example of this common use of the term as it offers many free (but also paid) online resources for planning, directing, and distributing a documentary. In this context, desktop documentary is a mode of production and distribution, but lacks a specific set of formal principles, as well as a critical or self-conscious formal methodology.

The use and theorisation of the “desktop documentary” in the context of education studies is closer to Lee’s understanding and practice of the concept. The term has been used since the mid-2000s to describe, study, and encourage the production of “an audio-visual film presentation using digital software on either a computer desktop or laptop” (Schul 2012) by north-American students of all levels in their History classrooms. According to James Schul (2013), the desktop documentary is an important pedagogical tool that encourages students’ immersion in the subject matter and stimulates a research-led learning process that makes students more familiar with historiographic methods. By locating and combining different audiovisual, photographic, and written sources, students become aware of the historicity and material quality of historical documents and are thus better equipped to understand the analytical and comparative methods required to build an historical argument. Another pedagogical advantage of desktop documentary making would be its ability to stimulate collective learning experiences. From the planning stage to the video production and its final presentation, students are encouraged to help each other with technical issues, and also to review and discuss their colleagues’ work. The growing interest in desktop documentary making in the United States, on the part of both students and teachers, is attested by the increasing number of video submissions to the National History Day annual documentary competition (Schul 2011). From this

⁸⁰ <http://www.desktop-documentaries.com/>

perspective, desktop documentary is seen as a way to enliven and enhance a learning experience that taps into students technological literacies and that necessarily draws their attention to the methods that shape historiographical discourse. In spite of this, its main objective is not to develop audiovisual literacy in itself, that is, the awareness of the mediating role of the computer and of the semiotic and material qualities of the moving image. James Schul's (2013) normative assignment of univocal functions to specific editing and composition techniques is a clear indication of the *instrumental* purpose of this practice of desktop documentary. Regardless of this, and of the immense formal differences that separate this educational practice from Lee's desktop audiovisual essays, it is possible to see how both share a concern with the epistemological affordances of digital viewing and editing technologies. However, classroom desktop documentaries employ the digital manipulation of moving images to make students aware of the mediating qualities of historiographical discourses, whereas Lee's understanding of the concept foregrounds the mediating role of the digital manipulation of moving images in itself, making it the prime object of his work.

Interface 2.0

It is to the work of Harun Farocki that we must turn to search for a more direct influence on Lee's desktop cinema. *Interface 2.0* (2012, 7min), Lee's first experiment with this method, is a restaging of Farocki's video installation *Schnittstelle* (1995). In his version, Lee updates Farocki's reflexive analysis of video editing technology, putting it into the context of contemporary digital editing and personal computers. As Lee noted, this is not the first time someone employed a "critical application of Farocki's methods" by restaging one of his films. *What Farocki Taught* (1998), directed by Jill Godmilow, restaged Farocki's *Nicht löschesbares Feuer / Inextinguishable Fire* (1969), a film about the production of Napalm B by Dow Chemical Company—this time in colour, spoken in English, and with a nearly 5-minute-long epilogue. Godmilow was thus right and wrong when she presented her film as an "exact replica" of Farocki's. As Tom Gunning

clarified, Godmilow's copy "does not eclipse the original. It is in dialogue with it. It makes you think about the original, and indeed emphasizes its distance from you, the viewer. But instead of that distance being a problem to overcome, it grabs it as an opportunity for reflection. The distance itself becomes the space in which the film takes place." (Gunning 1999)

In the case of *Interface 2.0*, the purpose of the restaging strategy is also to underline the distance between Lee's version and Farocki's original film. This process combines *imitation* (the replication of the original work) with the *adaptation* of the original context to the contemporary period (the change from video to digital editing technologies). If *imitation* allows Lee to similarly elect mediation and the general affordances of editing technologies as his main concerns, the *adaptation* offers precious insights into the specific affordances of *digital* editing technologies. Lee replicates entire sequences from *Schnittstelle*, introducing important differences that contrast his use of a computer and a digital editing program with Farocki's use of a video editing station. In the first sequence of *Interface 2.0*, Lee plays a shot from Farocki film in full frame. Farocki's shot is itself a split-screen that shows, on the left, the German director writing on a notepad while a monitor is seen in the background (a split-screen inside the split-screen, as it were), and on the right, another video monitor showing archival footage. Farocki reads aloud what he is writing: "I can hardly write a word these days if there isn't an image on the screen at the same time. Actually: on both screens." In Lee's restaging of this shot, the *mise-en-abîme* of the viewing devices and of the successive split-screens is further multiplied. In the foreground, we see the screen of Lee's open laptop computer showing, on the left, a word processor window (the digital equivalent of Farocki analogue writing pad) and on the right, a video player window with Farocki's original shot. In the background, behind Lee's computer, we see part of another computer screen, showing the editing program where Lee is working on *Interface 2.0*. After Farocki's shot is replayed, Lee similarly reads aloud what he writes in the word processor: "I can hardly write an image these days unless there's a word on the screen at the same time. Actually, on both screens." I only realized the subtle difference after I replayed *Interface 2.0* in my own computer, similarly using a word processor window to note down both sentences, thus adding yet another

layer to this infinite *mise-en-abîme* of shots within shots, and split-screens within split-screens: where Farocki speaks of writing *words*, Lee speaks of writing *images*.

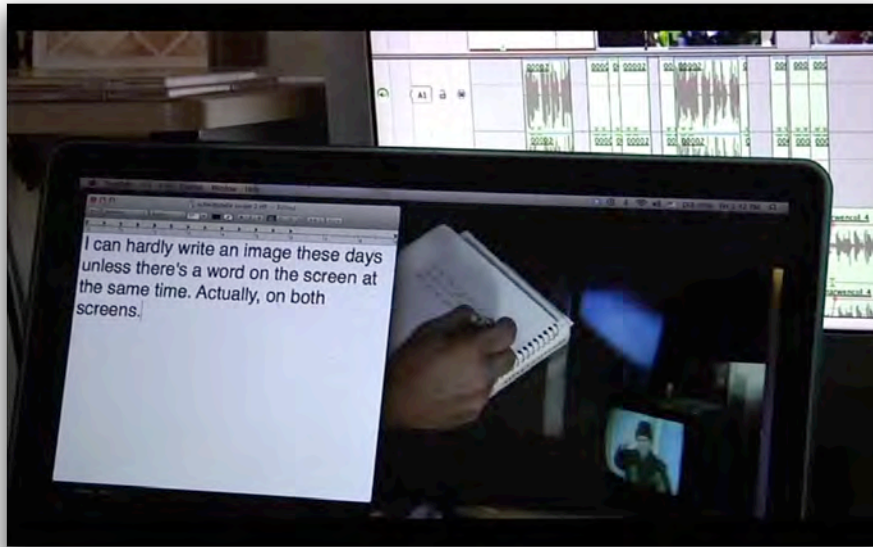


Figure 46: *Interface 2.0* (Kevin B. Lee, 2012)

Lee's variation is important because it illuminates not only the "new" context of digital editing technologies, but also something that was already visible in Farocki's technological context: in both cases, it is the presence of simultaneously presented images that is the precondition for thinking and writing about them. The second sequence of *Interface 2.0* develops this point further. In this case, Lee uses a split-screen to simultaneously compare Farocki's shot and his restaging of the same shot. Once again, each frame of the split-screen is also structured across numerous screens. In Farocki's shot, we have a literal split-screen with two frames slightly superimposing each other. On the left frame, Farocki is shot over his shoulder sitting at his video editing station and explaining its components: control desk, the video player, the video recorder, and two video monitors. On the right frame, we see some of the images Farocki is working on. In Lee's version, on the right hand side of the frame, there is one single frame showing Lee also sitting in front of his desktop computer, in which an editing program is visible, with its distinctive thumbnails, timelines, and two preview windows. The differences are highlighted by the descriptive narration of both directors: Farocki's narration is tuned down, but is still accessible through

the English subtitles; Lee's narration is in full volume, and synchronized to Farocki's. When the German director points and names the "control desk, the player, the recorder," Lee similarly indicates "the computer, the keyboard, and a monitor". A further variation in the commentary makes the differences between the two editing contexts even more striking. While Farocki has two monitors and thus concludes that, in his editing station, "there are two images seen at the same time —one image in relation to the other," Lee notes that in his case, the computer monitor "is one image, consisting of many different images, each in relation to the other." This statement reiterates Lee's option to use a single screen—in which different images are visible—in contrast to Farocki's use of the split-screen to show different images. In this way, Lee makes the point that, in the context of digital editing, images co-exist in the same physical space—the computer screen—rather than being dispersed across independent physical video monitors—a feature inherent to the video editing technology that Farocki used and that was greatly emphasised in the multi-channel video installation that provided the first presentation context for *Schnittstelle* (see Blümlinger 2002).



Figure 47: *Interface 2.0* (Kevin B. Lee, 2012)

One could argue that both Lee's and Farocki's representation of editing rests, once again, upon the formal spatialization of its technical and intellectual qualities. However, Lee's restaging displays that spatialization as a digital

phenomenon that distributes different images across the surface of a computer screen, whereas in Farocki's film that spatialization spreads across distinct tridimensional devices, such as the multiple video monitors. Accordingly, when *Interface 2.0* restages Farocki's "analytical transfer" —the central sequence in *Schnittstelle* where another film is entirely re-edited—, Lee's computer screen, and his digital editing software window in particular, will occupy the full frame of the audiovisual essay. Not unlike some of the cultural analytics and visualization tools mentioned above (including Lee's own audiovisual-ASL analysis in *Cinematic Candles...*), Farocki's "analytical transfer" consists of copying half a second from all the shots of the film that is being analysed (the title is not identified in *Schnittstelle*). Playing back the result —an experience similar to watching the entire movie in extreme fast-forward—, Farocki is able to highlight the analysed film's recurrent formal patterns and structures, concluding that the case at hand is characterised by a repetitive alternation of stills, words and moving images. In Lee's restaging, it is *Schnittstelle* itself that is re-edited, or summarized, in this way. Lee illustrates the entire process, which is shown ostensibly: we watch not only Lee's hands on the keyboard, but also the changes in the thumbnails, timelines and preview windows of Lee's digital editing program, as he re-edits Farocki's film. After performing his digital "analytical transfer", Lee makes his own conclusions about *Schnittstelle*'s structure:

"It's evident that the film summarized here depicts a man's experience of his work through the tactile quality of its images, primarily through the relationship of hands working, eyes watching, and images being worked over. Each of these images is like a gesture, pointing to another. Here's Harun Farocki making a gesture. A gesture is something without words that communicates something else. An image can be a gesture, commenting on another image." (*Interface 2.0*, audio commentary)



Figure 48: *Interface 2.0* (Kevin B. Lee, 2012)

Presented as a conclusion to *Interface 2.0*, these words indicate that Lee has fully embraced Farocki's suggestion about the greater importance of images over words in analysing (in commenting on) other images. As we have seen, this is a somewhat recurrent topic, one that regularly punctuates *Interface 2.0* and which lends it an almost manifesto-like tone. Lee argues, in short, that it is worth abandoning *one* verbally expressed meaning in favour of the *several* meanings suggested by a relation between two moving images thanks to the *gesture* of editing. However, a much more far-reaching conclusion is implicit in *Interface 2.0*. By re-staging Farocki's film, Lee has, in fact, re-enacted the conditions of possibility of editing in the digital context. Here, and in stark contrast to Farocki's context of video technology, editing images is necessarily a *gesture*, that is, the result of their manipulation as objects that co-exist in the *same identical space* —i.e., the virtual, two-dimensional space of the computer screen and of the editing software program, either in iconic (moving images in the preview windows) or in graphical representations (in the program's timeline and in the thumbnails that are a shorthand for each complete shot). Lee is illustrating, in other words, the epistemological affordances of the *gestural* use of editing inherent to digital editing software, which Catherine Grant had already described as one central feature of the digital audiovisual essay. Like Farocki's, Lee's essay features prominently "hands working, eyes watching, and images being worked over." Lee's hands and eyes, as well as Farocki's, figure abundantly in his video,

either directly displayed as he observes his computer screen carefully and clicks on the keyboard, cutting, moving, and playing images and sounds; or indirectly (in the shots where the editing program window is in full frame), through the movement of his mouse cursor on the timeline, the thumbnails, or the preview windows.

Through the representation of the various elements of the editing software, the essays analysed in the previous section suggest that the computer screen is the *context* of both this gestural use of editing and of the *communication* of its affordances to the spectators. *Interface 2.0* explicitly reflects upon this notion, henceforth at the centre of Lee's analysis and of his formal strategies. The combination of shots framing Lee and his computer *with* shots where his computer screen features exclusively, further attests to the transitional quality of this audiovisual essay. The movement that shifts the spectator from looking over Lee's shoulder to looking directly at his computer screen would be complete for the first time with *Transformers: The Premake* (2014), where Lee only uses his computer screen, no longer limited to the digital editing program window, to develop his exploration of *desktop cinema*.

Transformers

In *Transformers: The Premake* (2014, 25min; henceforth *The Premake*), Lee would shift to an exclusive use of the desktop cinema method. This allowed him, in addition to an analysis of the shooting process of Michael Bay's global blockbuster, to address two other issues, for the first time in his audiovisual essays. There, Lee would investigate, first, the politics of image circulation in the context of digital communications networks and digital audiovisual viewing and editing tools; and, second, the role of desktop cinema in that circulation. In other words, desktop cinema enabled Lee to challenge the digital audiovisual essay as a neutral or univocal "decoder" of audiovisual culture.

The Premake documents the shooting of a Hollywood blockbuster in several American cities, Hong Kong and Mainland China. Lee was specifically interested in how the many casual observers and fans of the *Transformers'*

franchise documented this shooting worldwide by making short videos with their smartphones and uploading them to YouTube. Lee located more than 355 such videos, to which he added his own, made during location shooting in Chicago. These videos, Lee suggests, anticipate Bay's movie, and by assembling them Lee orchestrated, at it were, a "premake" of a Hollywood blockbuster as imagined by its spectators across the world. But these spectators were not the only ones to imagine the movie: just like any other Hollywood blockbuster, *Transformers 4* also anticipated, or "pre-made" its spectators' experiences. A sino-american co-production, the movie specifically targeted Chinese audiences. It used several Chinese actors and locations, and integrated Chinese cultural references into the plot. Some US locations (like Detroit) were also characterised as Chinese cities to depict specific action sequences. This aspect prompted Lee to investigate the global economy behind the production of this specific film and to enquire as to the role of the hundreds of amateur online videos, as well as his own videos, in this process. Were these amateur filmmakers competing or collaborating with Michael Bay? As Lee quickly concluded, the difference is thin and "[e]arrest amateur filmmaking can easily become sideline cheerleading for global media juggernauts" (Lee 2014f). Amateur filmmaking seems so widespread that anyone can not only make their own movies, but also anticipate an industrial blockbuster such as *Transformers 4*. In this popular, collective premake, it is not only the movie plot that is documented, but also the experiences of the spectators as they take part in the shooting —either as sidewalk observers, or even as extras. In this way, amateurs can supplement the director and the big studio narrative with their own personal points of view, even before the film is released⁸¹. Is it not difficult to understand how these popular appropriations of corporate filmmaking may be perceived as a threat by production companies, almost as daunting as the illegal downloading of the films after their completion.

It should come as no surprise, then, that Paramount should have tried to prevent the public from filming and sharing videos of the shooting. This was achieved by limiting access to the shooting locations (even when they were

⁸¹ A popular variation can be found in the "fake trailer" genre, which involves no original shooting or observation of the shooting process. See K. A. Williams (2012) and Dusi (2014).

located in public areas) and by claiming copyright infringement over videos uploaded to YouTube (which proceeded to remove those videos). In China, the videos' removal was conducted by the authorities and driven by political as much as economic reasons. Indeed, it was so systematic that Lee could hardly find any amateur videos to document shooting there. Some videos were, however, tolerated by Paramount, thus indicating that they "served a benign purpose as far as the company was concerned, by spreading awareness of the film" (Lee 2014f). Lee suggests that at least some of this user-generated content also functions as a form of "crowdsourced movie promotion" where the spectators' filming, uploading, sharing and commenting on the shooting process generates a hype around the blockbuster even before its release. In other words, amateur filmmaking can also function as a form of *fan labour* that adds important value to the studios' product, the blockbuster.

By addressing these issues, Lee tried to grasp the *material* world lurking behind the production and consumption of finished audiovisual products —such as the Hollywood blockbuster—, which is to say, the global economy, the social and power relations that are involved in the making, distribution and reception of moving images. From a Marxist perspective, we could say that Lee sought to deconstruct the commodification of moving images and reveal the material and social relations that are fetishized in their production, distribution, and consumption. The formal strategies of *The Premake* are, taken as a whole, organized not only to document the social and material relations implicit in the production and consumption of contemporary moving images, but also to test, and indeed to explode, the conditions of digital mediation of contemporary audiovisual culture. The structure of *The Premake* organises a vast amount of written texts, still and moving images and sounds so as to deploy a considerable number of arguments, always without recourse to audio commentary. With the help of a simple screen capture program (now usually a built-in feature in most personal computers⁸²), Lee opens successive windows, using them to create new frames inside his screen; specific information is highlighted by zooming in movements, or by superimposing new, smaller windows on the screen. Watching

⁸² Video screen captures are available, for example, in Apple's QuickTime Player, and in Microsoft X-Box built-in app in Windows 10.

the resulting video is, to a great extent, like watching a recording of Lee's computer-led research about this subject (or a recording of a re-enacted and abridged version of that research) as he performs searches on the Internet, downloads and plays online videos, opens, compares video files in his hard drives, takes notes in a word processor, uses maps and animated presentations to locate the origin of online videos and other information, etc.

The opening sequence of *The Premake* provides an exemplary illustration of this method. After the title of the essay is typed in a word processor, shown full screen, *The Premake* takes off from Lee's empty desktop. The arrow cursor that tracks Lee's mouse movements activates the Internet browser Google Chrome in his MacBookPro's lateral dock. YouTube is looked up and activated, then searched for "Transformers 4" related videos. Lee scrolls down YouTube's result list, highlighting a selected link before opening it in a new window. After zooming out, he places the two windows side by side, the desktop background image still visible behind them. While the selected video is playing (an official trailer of Michael Bay's movie), a slow zoom in movement brings it into full screen, but only for a few seconds; Lee immediately pans back to the search results in the first window, where he activates an amateur video shot in Chicago. As this video is played, the volume of the trailer is muted.

This is a standard formal structure in *The Premake*, and of Lee's desktop cinema method in general. Internet searches occupy as much time and space as the presentation of their results. Videos, text, diagrams, maps and still images co-exist in simultaneously displayed windows. These windows are not static, nor is the dimension of the screen fixed: there is a continuous movement that combines the multiplication or disappearance of windows with reframing movements such as panning and zooming. And finally, videos are allowed in full screen mode for only a few seconds at a time: all videos and Internet searches lead to the next and the reproduction of moving images is only as important as the manifestation of the relations between them.

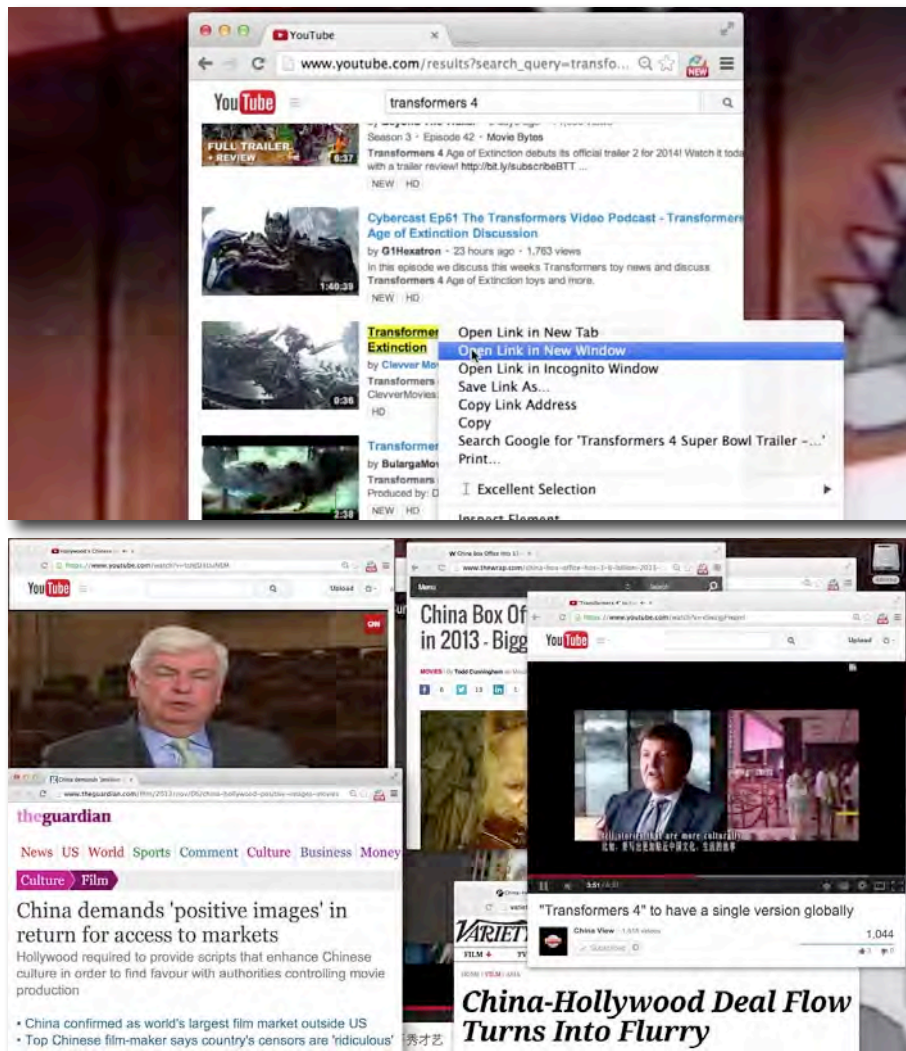


Figure 49: Two frames from *Transformers: The Premake* (Kevin B. Lee, 2014)

Desktop cinema thus allows Lee's audiovisual essay to reproduce in a particularly effective way several mediation experiences: the everyday experiences of the casual Web 2.0 user that makes, views and shares amateur videos with his smartphone; the experience of the expert audiovisual essayist that recombines those second-hand images in ways that speak to their original meaning, but also to the politics of their circulation and the power relations implicit in their consumption. This underscoring of the relations between images and the mediating role of the personal computer, makes desktop cinema a perfect illustration of the internalization of the double logic of remediation in the computer interface. Here, this process is made obvious to the spectator, as he becomes conscious of his own viewing activities and of the material existence and circulation of moving images. In *The Premake*, some images might function as *transparent windows* to a world beyond the computer desktop, while others

are *opaque screens* that remind the spectator of their constructed nature and of the process of technological mediation that makes them possible. In fact, all the displayed windows in *The Premake* seem to integrate both functions, as they contribute equally to a sense of immediacy of the represented images, and to a sense of the hypermediacy of the graphical interface that makes their representation possible. In *The Premake*, what captures the spectator's attention and motivates such a pleasurable viewing experience are the striking amateur videos selected by Lee *and* their framing as windowed video files. In other words, Lee systematically refuses to naturalize those amateur videos, always resisting to show them in full frame, or quickly reminding the spectators that they are mere video files that can be searched, stored and replayed at will, their windows resized, moved around, or whisked away to give place to yet another video file.

Lee explicitly addresses the tension between the two driving forces of remediation at the end of *The Premake*. The final sequence shows Michael Bay's famous walk out during a Samsung sales event at the Consumer Electronics Show in 2014. When the teleprompter breaks down, Bay seems at a loss; but when his host invites him to "just tell us what you think," the notion of an improvised talk sends him over the edge and he walks out of the room. Lee is not interested at having one more go at a personal failure that had already gone viral on the Internet. When Lee covers the screen with all those humorous videos, he is echoing instead the abundance of screen displays in the audience and on stage, "hovering like fireflies around a spectacle of celebrity enthroned in high-def images" (Lee 2014f). Furthermore, when Lee parodies Bay's breakdown by rapidly changing the direction of his video's motion back and forth in his editing program, he is really underlining the impossibility of contemporary audiovisual culture deviating from a "sense of reality on display [which] is scripted in the service of a pre-packaged, tightly wound consumerism." (Lee 2014f)

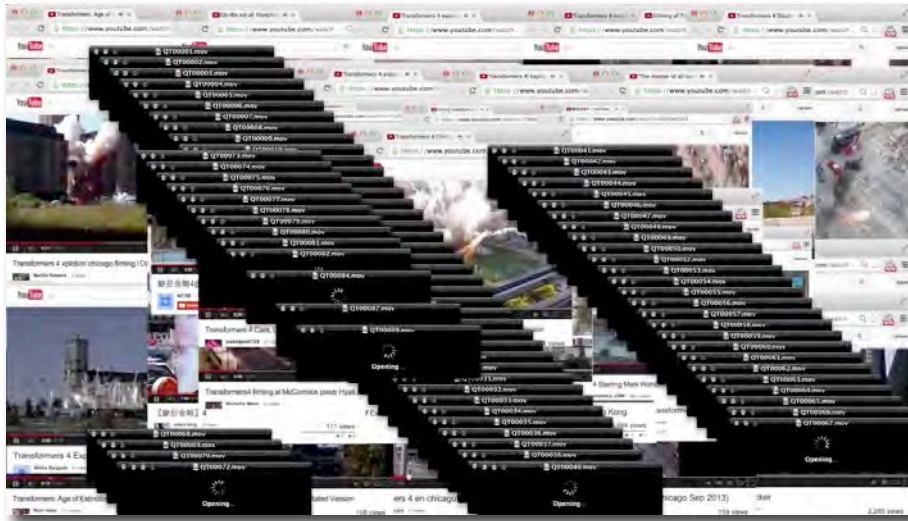


Figure 50: *Transformers: The Premake* (Kevin B. Lee, 2014)

When the image reveals its presence as such —that is, as constructed commodity—, it is as if the entire system breaks down. After Bay's submersion in the images of his public failure, it is the turn of Lee's computer desktop to be flooded by a cascading wave of opening video files. The effort proves too much and his computer crashes as well. One way to interpret this crash would be as a simple representation of the systemic break introduced by desktop cinema. Another interpretation could see here the representation of the flood of moving images that the audiovisual essay must mobilize at the (very real) risk of being submerged by exactly what it tries to make sense of.

Articulating discontent

Lee's reflections on the critical potential of the audiovisual essay was prompted by a late attempt to define the form in relation to the essay film tradition. Taking advantage of his (by now) long experience with the form, Lee tried to identify the most salient features of the audiovisual essay in two recent videos. The first was *The Essay Film: Some Thoughts of Discontent* (2013, 7min), commissioned by *Sight & Sound's* website on the occasion of "Thought in Action: The Art of the Essay Film" season that ran at BFI Southbank, in August 2013. *The Essay Film* is not only an attempt to define the form, but also to "argue for what true value this as-yet loosely-defined mode of filmmaking could bring to a world that is already drowning in media." (Lee 2013b) The second essay, titled *Elements of the Essay*

Film (2014, 8min), was published in *Keyframe*'s website and, according to Lee, is a "formalist appreciation of how the essayistic mode uses sounds, images, words and as editing differently than other forms of cinema". *Elements...* could be seen, then, as the enumeration of the formal components that are relevant to the definition of the audiovisual essay put forward in the former video.

Unlike most of the other debates about the distinguishing features of the audiovisual essay, Lee's definition was guided by the contribution of those elements to the essay's *critical* function. To Lee, the audiovisual essay's specific distinguishing elements are less important than the ways in which they can be combined to stimulate critical forms of spectatorship. In this way, the *value* of an audiovisual essay is equated with its *critical potential*, which in turn is to be measured against its ability to interpellate the spectator through the use of reflexive strategies: "an essay film explicitly reflects on the materials it presents, to actualise the thinking process itself." (Lee 2013a)

Like many of his peers, Lee has taken the discussion of the reflexive strategies that call attention to the structures of representation and of technological mediation well beyond the device of the voice-over. *Elements...* is a manifesto-life presentation of the different formal devices (and their combinations) that can be used by the audiovisual essayist. Using examples from the several films composing the BFI Southbank season about the essay film, Lee showcases how images (either filmed or found footage), words (spoken or written), and sounds (music or other aural elements) can be organized by editing to comment on each other and, even, to change how they are perceived by the spectators (voice that works as sound, text that works as image). In doing so, Lee is far from presenting any normative definition of the audiovisual essay. His examples show that *all* elements —visual, aural, and verbal-based— are welcome. More importantly, *Elements...* makes clear that the *combinations* between elements are as central as any individual elements to the critical purposes of the digital audiovisual essay. According to Lee, the critical role of the audiovisual essay is to make the spectator aware of the relational qualities of those elements and of their role in the production of meaning. More than its relevant contributions to the specific issues it addresses, the audiovisual essay offers "another way to see" (*The Essay Film...*) that calls attention to the

processes of semiotic representation and technological mediation. This idea is perfectly encapsulated in an image that is present in both *The Essay Film...* and *Elements...* In this point of view shot, taken from José Luis Guerín's *Tren de sombras/Train of Shadows* (1997), the spectator is put in the place of a character who simultaneously watches a garden outside and his own image reflected in the glass pane of a window. A caption in *Elements...* drives Lee's point home: "The essay film is a screen that lets us see in two directions at once / exploring its subject and at the same time exploring how it sees its subject." This image illustrates perfectly desktop cinema and the principle of remediation that shapes it. But the ambiguous position of the reflected individual —is he inside the apartment or outside in the garden?— is also a reminder that the same double logic of remediation places the digital audiovisual essay at the intersection of two competing drives: the enhanced consumption, or the critical distance vis-à-vis contemporary audiovisual culture.



Figure 51: *The Essay Film: Some Thoughts of Discontent* (Kevin B. Lee, 2013)

The Essay Film... seems especially concerned with placing the audiovisual essay on the "right" side of this dilemma. Using a series of compelling images, this essay establishes a sombre diagnosis on contemporary audiovisual culture. In the first sequence, which adds a new voiceover commentary to a scene from the television show *The Simpsons*, the production and distribution of moving images is compared to a meat processing plant with the logos of big studios

superimposed on its exterior walls. This comparison not only extends *The Premake's* premise about the fetishization of the material and social relations involved in the commodification of moving images, but it also assigns to the spectator the purely passive role of the unwitting consumer. This sequence is, after all, a good example of the pseudo-critical role of the digital audiovisual essay: it offers an interpretation of audiovisual culture without challenging it, and —more importantly— without questioning the role of the audiovisual essay in the reiteration of the status quo. In the essay's second sequence, a tablet playing a very rapid split-screen succession of scroll-downs from Tumblr and Twitter is placed in a sink under an open faucet. The pouring water obviously replicates the tablet's incessant flow of moving images and, as Lee's narration explains, it provides a visual representation of the sense that “to be in the world today is to be engulfed in sensory data, drowning us in its incessant stream”. But there is an additional notion conveyed by this image. Lee asks whether this condition cannot be turned against itself: “if we are submerged in sounds and images can we somehow used them to stay afloat?”

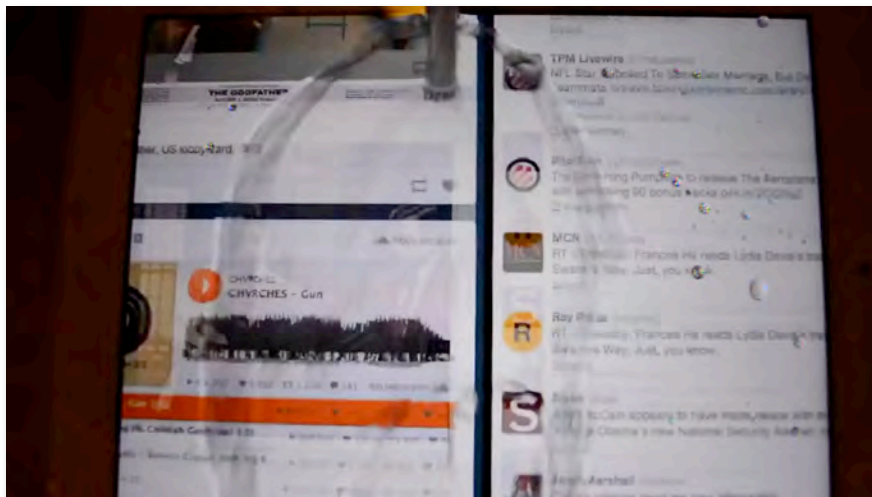


Figure 52: *The Essay Film: Some Thoughts of Discontent* (Kevin B. Lee, 2013)

The answer is hardly simple as far as the digital audiovisual essay is concerned. If it must necessarily work with the images and sounds that prompt a critical response from the spectators, what prevents those same images from further engulfing the spectator in this circulatory abundance and its cycles of consumption? The solution, Lee suggests, is to use the essay film *against itself*, as

it were, and to deny its function as a “decoding” or a “reading” mechanism of moving images. On the contrary, the essayistic stance must be one of dissatisfaction and “discontent with the duties of an image and the obligations of a sound.” (Kodwo Eshun, quoted in *The Essay Film...*) From this perspective, which is reminiscent of Farocki’s influence over Lee’s work as well as of the strategy of *détournement*, the audiovisual essay is less an instruction manual that allows moving images to be decoded than—in the true spirit of the Situationist double negation of mass culture—a “counter-instruction manual that helps us to decode those instructions, so that we might learn how *not to follow them*” (Lee 2014g; my emphasis). By making spectators aware of the constitutive ambiguities of the double logic of remediation that guides their engagements with contemporary audiovisual culture, Lee’s desktop cinema is in a position to not simply *dismiss* or *embrace* the contemporary consumption of moving images, but to recognise the spectators’ central role in this process. Taking into account spectator experiences and pleasures, the audiovisual essay that is shaped by desktop cinema practices can conceivably place spectators in a more critically aware position with regard to how digitally-mediated audiovisual texts function, where they come from, and what larger forces are behind their dissemination and consumption. It could, in other words, make spectators aware of their role in the cycle of consumption of moving images and, instead of harvesting their pseudo-critical activities to enhance consumption and reiterate the social and economic relations, it could foster new ways to understand, to interrupt, and even to short-circuit that cycle and the current status quo. Thus, and to conclude with Lee’s remarks,

“the essay film might realise a greater purpose than existing as a trendy label, or as cinema’s submission to high-toned and half-defined literary concepts. Instead, the essay film may serve as a springboard to launch into a vital investigation of knowledge, art and culture in the 21st century, including the question of what role cinema itself might play in this critical project: articulating discontent with its own place in the world.” (Lee 2013a)

Concluding remarks

From video lecture to videographic experimentation, and from savvy supercut to desktop cinema, this chapter covered some of the characteristics and influences of the digital audiovisual essay, comparing and contrasting it to the contexts of personal cinephilia, film criticism, and academic film studies; and with the traditions of the essay film and online cultural forms, the academic lecture and the classroom, the film review and the academic article. More than a set of specific characteristics of the audiovisual essay, the authors analysed here have shown the richness of personal trajectories marked by continuous experimentation with the form. The importance of defining this form of essayism as *audio-visual* should also have become obvious, with sound, music and voice taking on as much relevance as the purely visual elements of these “rich text objects”. The product of Web 2.0, the audiovisual essay has also proven its public, collaborative nature. This feature contributed positively to its militant defence, embraced by all the authors discussed in this chapter and indeed constitutive of its ongoing process of institutionalization —which in turn generated some misgivings, even among the form’s supporters. Finally, the option to describe these audiovisual essays as *digital* was hopefully also vindicated, the affordances of digital viewing and editing technologies being not only the condition, but indeed the object of so many of these videos.

The product, but also the catalyser of both “a ‘reinvention’ of textual analysis and a new wave of cinephilia” (Mulvey 2006, 160), the audiovisual essay embodies the intimate relation between those two activities that characterises contemporary, digitally-mediated audiovisual culture since the mid-2000s. The audiovisual essay is founded upon a reflexive use of editing that re-enacts the formal operations of montage, thus reminding us of how these have been internalized in everyday engagements with audiovisual culture. This process is nowhere more obvious than in the desktop cinema method, which vividly (if not literally) illustrates the prevalence of the double logic of remediation in every digitally mediated viewing situation. Both opaque screen and transparent window, the audiovisual essay made in accordance to this method clearly emulates the role of the computer interface in audiovisual culture: a place where

the conditions of mediation are negotiated, world and representation reciprocally defined. Deeply rooted in this process —as so many other contemporary audiovisual texts—, the digital audiovisual essay brings heightened visibility to the role of the spectator in an active, perceptually demanding reception process whose precondition is the manipulation of the text, and whose consequences are intense intellectual and sensuous rewards.

In its balancing of pleasure and knowledge, the audiovisual essay plays an exemplary and ambiguous role in relation to contemporary audiovisual culture. It is exemplary of the contemporary forms of consumption that have made critical activity and the manipulation of audiovisual texts (with all its epistemological potentials) a mere additional step in the cycle of consumption. In its worse cases, the digital audiovisual essay domesticates montage to curtail its critical potential. But it also possesses the unique ability to expose this process and to express discontent about its own role in it, that is, to refuse its own lessons about digitally mediated culture. The question, however, remains: will even this self-conscious expression of discontent become integrated in the cycle of consumption of audiovisual culture?

Conclusion: the politics of the audiovisual essay

The digital audiovisual essay is a mode of audiovisual and material thinking about cinema with a growing number of authors and a rising level of acceptance both inside and outside academia. More than just a new scholarly research method, it is a popular cultural form that both reflects on, and investigates, how cinema is watched, appropriated and studied in the context of digital culture and the Web 2.0. It explores the affordances of digital technologies for these purposes and mobilizes a variety of methods, ranging from poetic creativity to explanatory scholarship, and from fandom practices to film criticism. It both indulges in and criticizes its own conditions of possibility, namely the mass production, distribution, and reception of audiovisual texts that digital delivery technologies and the Web 2.0 have enabled since the mid-2000s.

Accordingly, this dissertation has argued that the digital audiovisual essay is an exemplary text of contemporary audiovisual culture. It refused, however, to posit either its *critical potential* or its *newness* as the guiding premises of its analysis. On the contrary, it used the concept of *remediation* and described the key formal operations of the audiovisual essay (such as montage and its fragmentation, recombination and repetition of the moving image) and its chief editing and compositional techniques (like the split-screen and superimpositions, motion alterations and freeze frames, or the combination of verbal and audiovisual elements of communication) — to argue instead that it should be inscribed in the tradition of *modernism* and its similar ambiguous relation to mass culture.

This methodological approach highlighted the ideological functions of those formal operations and the ways in which the audiovisual essay has updated and enhanced them. In doing so, this dissertation underlined an interpretation of modernism that still makes it relevant to understand contemporary audiovisual culture. According to this view, the internalization of modernist formal operations by digital delivery technologies affords

epistemological discoveries merely as a ruse to inoculate spectators against critical thought. This happens mostly because the formal operations that afford insights into textual and spectator formation processes are also what negates the understanding of these processes as part of a larger network of social, economic, and political relations. In other words, the totality of material relations shaping and explaining contemporary audiovisual culture are fetishized as semiotic relations —their capacity to understand, let alone change the material world, recognized only to be disavowed as a real, tangible possibility. Choosing this theoretical framework, this dissertation has, in short, investigated the politics of the audiovisual essay: not only the consequences of its practice (the ideological functions inherent to its production and reception), but also its role as both a product and an agent of this process. To suggest that the practice of the audiovisual essay always has political consequences is a reminder that its emancipatory potential is never to be taken for granted. On the contrary, the audiovisual essay highlights how, in contemporary digitally mediated audiovisual culture, the forces of critique and consumerism are always interdependent. The audiovisual essay is not located in one or the other side of this divide, but rather it proves that in contemporary capitalism no such divide exists in the first place. To expose the interdependency of the critical and consumerist drives is a necessary first step to challenge the social, economic and political *status quo* implicit in the processes of production, circulation, and reception of contemporary audiovisual culture —but by no means the only, nor the final step to fend off capitalism's resilience to critical activities.

This theoretical framework simultaneously guided and resulted from the analysis of several dozens of digital audiovisual essays. Although other cultural forms would certainly have illuminated contemporary audiovisual culture as well, the digital audiovisual essay imposed itself as the obvious example. By documenting the spectatorial experiences of cinema in the context of digital delivery technologies and the Web 2.0, the audiovisual essay entertains an extremely ambiguous relation with the film object —its subject of choice. The digital audiovisual essay both documents and encourages spectatorship practices characterized by pensive and possessive relations with cinema, thus reshaping and extending the scale and contexts of its consumption. It highlights

the contradictions inherent to the reception and appropriation of cinema in the context of digital culture, positing those contradictions not as exclusive alternatives, but as complementary, interdependent activities. The selection of case studies aims to document the form's rich methodological diversity, even inside a single author's personal trajectory, while at the same time tracing the main thread of the dissertation's argument. The digital audiovisual essay is still a developing field in the double sense that it is both an active cultural practice and an academic subject that has attracted scant attention thus far. This dissertation was not, therefore, intended as a survey of a still developing field, but rather as the practical demonstration of a method of analysis and of a theoretical framework that are suited to account for the digital audiovisual essays produced until now. Hopefully, it will encourage other scholars to pursue this subject along these lines, either by performing more textual analysis of the work of single essayists, or by focusing on specific formal operations and individual techniques such as they are used across a number of authors —thus broadening our understanding of the politics of the audiovisual essay and, alongside it, the material conditions that shape contemporary audiovisual culture.

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